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Opinion

by Robert Silverberg

Last issue this space was devoted to the question of how to go about becoming a writer — and the advice I offered was, essentially, that what you need to do is read and read and read until you have absorbed all you can possibly hold, and then to write and write and write until the act of putting words on paper in some satisfactory pattern becomes second nature to you. A would-be writer who doesn't read is one who has cut himself off from vital sources of inspiration, information, and technical observation; a would-be writer who isn't already writing regularly, regardless of the present level of his skill or maturity, is one who's going to remain would-be for the rest of his life.

There was one aspect of *Becoming a Writer* that I chose not to discuss at all, last time. Implicit in what I had to say was the underlying notion that learning to write fiction is primarily a solitary task: the individual who wants to be a writer, I suggested, needs to carry out his own study of the craft of fiction as it has been practiced by his predecessors, and then, having isolated the basic principles of fiction through observation and analysis, he must teach himself how to put those principles into action. But must writing be entirely a self-taught skill? What about the multitudes of writers' classes and workshops that exist across the land? Are they completely without value? What about the shelves upon shelves of books that purport to teach one how to write? Can anything be learned

from them? Or — as I seemed to be saying last time — is it simply a process of hard, lonely self-education?

My own bias has probably already made itself apparent. I took no courses in "creative writing" in college: I was too busy writing. (My first novel, *Revolt on Alpha C*, was published in the summer of 1955, between my junior and senior years at Columbia.) Soon after my graduation from college in 1956 I attended the first of the famous Milford Science Fiction Writers' Conferences in Pennsylvania; it was a glorious week-long party, a mini-convention for writers only, populated by the likes of Ted Sturgeon and Cyril Kornbluth and Jim Blish and Algis Budrys and Fred Pohl and Lester del Rey, and I had a grand time there as the junior member of the crowd. (There was another kid there about my age, a fellow named Ellison, who also seemed to show some promise of becoming a writer.) It was a lot of fun, and when a story of mine came up for discussion in a workshop session I got a useful suggestion for fixing it from Algis Budrys. ("Throw away the first ten pages," he said, and I did, and sold it a month later.) But Milford seemed a pretty cumbersome way of learning anything, and I never went back for another workshop session, although I frequently turned up on weekends for the parties.

Many years later came the Clarion Writers' Workshops, sponsored at first by Clarion State College in Pennsylvania, and later held at various campuses

around the country. An awesome roster of writers has served as the faculty for these workshops: Ursula K. Le Guin, Kate Wilhelm, Harlan Ellison, Samuel R. Delany, Fritz Leiber, Frank Herbert, Theodore Sturgeon, and many more. One year I even took a turn at it myself. Among the hundreds of novice writers who enrolled at Clarion are many who have gone on to significant professional careers:

Gardner Dozois, Vonda McIntyre, F. M. Busby, Octavia Butler, George Alec Effinger, John Shirley, and others. It sounds wonderful, and perhaps it is, but my feeling about Clarion is decidedly skeptical. I think that the Dozoises and Butlers and such may have learned a little there, but that basically they would have had the same sort of careers even if Clarion had never existed. I think that other writers, lesser ones, may actually have picked up new bad habits at Clarion, where the in-group reinforcement of arty tricks has been an ongoing problem. And still other writers may have gone away mortally discouraged by the criticism of their peers and given up altogether. At its best (and also at its worst) Clarion fosters a kind of solidarity among its attendees that lasts on into later life, an alumni clubbiness. But I can't escape a feeling that writing is not something best learned in a social context. Like making love, it's a private act, which one masters by repeated application of certain technical principles, and I'm not at all certain that the ideal place to learn its skills is in public.

Books about writing? Ah, that's a different matter. Though I think the best way to learn the craft of fiction is by studying published stories, I see no harm in accelerating the process by absorbing the teachings of those who have already carried out such analyses.

This may seem much like attending classes or workshops, but it feels different to me: reading books on writing is a solitary preparation for what is an inescapably solitary profession. To read such a book, to argue inwardly with its author, to take part in a silent dialectic of learning — that seems ideal to me.

Three books in particular helped me learn my craft. One was *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri, a book concerned primarily with plays, but filled with invaluable suggestions for the construction of dramatically moving scenes. The second was also a book about the drama: *Greek Tragedy* by H. D. F. Kitto. By analyzing the plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, it taught me unforgettably how plot and character are related. The third was *Writing to Sell*, by my former agent Scott Meredith, which covered all sorts of issues involved in a professional writing career, including a splendid chapter or two on the basics of story construction. It was in Scott's book that I first saw formulated the basic story skeleton that underlies virtually all fiction. It goes something like this:

A sympathetic and appealing character is faced with a difficult challenge. He struggles against overwhelming odds, but everything he does lands him in ever deeper trouble, until it seems that all is lost. Then, primarily through his own efforts, he succeeds in resolving his problem, or if he fails, he fails in a way that significantly demonstrates the nature of his character.

Sounds too simple? Check it out against *The Odyssey*, or *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, or *Oedipus Rex*, or *Hamlet*. It's been around for thousands of years. No one yet has come up with an improved model for narrative. It's only a skeleton — you have to dress it up

with characters, incidents, dialog, description, and such — but it's a universal skeleton. You'll find it inside last year's Hugo winner. You'll find it inside next year's Hugo winner, too.

Of course, many writers have figured out for themselves what these books on writing can teach. But I see no harm in studying such books, though it's still necessary to internalize the principles, even if someone else has codified them for you. I do see potential harm in traipsing around to classes and workshops, exposing one's self to input from those who don't necessarily have valid inputs to give (the blind leading the blind, all too often). Some writers have benefited from such operations; some have been harmed. On balance, I preferred to stay away. Others of a different temperament feel otherwise.

There's yet one more resource available to beginning writers: the editors of the magazines they hope to deal

with. I don't mean that editors provide much in the way of instruction; but rejection notes can be invaluable guides to the way *not* to do it, if you ponder them with care instead of with resentment. (Someday I'll quote a few that I received long ago. They made me angry then, but later I saw that they had set me on the path of righteousness.) Best of all, a good editor, seeing real talent in his pile of unsolicited manuscripts, will often opt to serve as a mentor to a gifted newcomer. Not often, of course, and not in any very extensive way, usually — but there is no instruction more valuable, if you're lucky enough to find it.

Forgive me my biases, those of you who dote on workshops and other public means of learning. Go thou and sign up for next semester's session forthwith. But these are the things that worked for me, at any rate, in my own journey toward a career as a professional writer. X

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Book Reviews

by Robert Coulson

The Frankenstein Papers

by Fred Saberhagen

Baen Books, \$3.50 (paperback)

Similar to the author's earlier *The Dracula Tape*, the story is told from the viewpoint of the monster, and "corrects" errors in the original story. Since my acquaintance with Frankenstein is only through movies, I'm sure I missed some of the satire here, but it was still a highly enjoyable book. It's probably funnier if you've read the original, but it's not necessary to have done so. The conclusion seemed a bit far out in more ways than one, but the monster's story is amusing and logical; probably more so than the original book and certainly more so than the movies. Highly recommended.

Free Live Free

by Gene Wolfe

Tor, \$16.95 (hardcover)

Frank Catalano reviewed the Ziesing limited edition here last year, but never once mentioned that the book is *funny*, and it's the most hilarious science fiction I've read in years. Well, Frank works in a west coast radio station; maybe the common people he meets resemble the characters here, but they struck me as a bit odd. Both the house-destruction scene and the one in the mental hospital could easily fit into a Marx Brothers movie. My only question about the book is to wonder if it was intended as a parody of Heinlein. Ben Free is a typical Heinlein character: powerful, knows all, has done everything, and is con-

stantly dispensing homespun philosophy. But he's offstage through most of the book, and the protagonists are these four schmucks who have become entangled with him and are trying to find out what it's all about. They aren't exactly Groucho, Chico, & Harpo in drag and Margaret Dumont; but they're close enough. Well worth the hardcover price, but be sure you get it in one version or another.

Heart of the Comet

by Greg Benford and David Brin

Bantam, \$17.95 (hardcover)

One can hope that all the Halley's Comet books coming out now are as good as this one, but it's unlikely. This involves an expedition to the comet at its next approach in 2061. The international crew finds, unexpectedly, that the comet has life of its own, which is capable of infecting them as well as producing gunk which fouls their machinery. Political tensions among the humans make the fight for survival even harder. It's an improbable situation; but if you grant lifeforms on a comet, the rest of the plot follows more or less naturally. The emphasis is on science and technology and human cussedness; characterization isn't brilliant but is acceptable. Story is told from three viewpoints: Carl, the spaceman who eventually becomes captain; Saul, the biologist who becomes chief medical officer and produces biological miracles more or less to order; and Virginia, the computer wizard and controller of automatic machinery who

is loved by both men. Normally I dislike multiple viewpoints because either the reader can't tell the protagonists apart, or the author manages to make only one or two of them interesting and the rest are a drag on the story. This time, the authors have avoided both problems, and produced an excellent novel.

The School of Darkness

by Manly Wade Wellman

Doubleday, \$12.95 (hardcover)

John Thunstone is back, crossing spells with the evil Rowley Thorne at a university symposium on folklore and legend, with the help of a few friends and a copy of *The Long Lost Friend*. (For a long time I wondered if that was a real book or a product of Wellman's imagination; now that I own a copy, I know it's real.) Villains in addition to Thorne are a modern witch coven, which I suppose will irritate some fantasy addicts who belong to covens of their own, but I found it quite acceptable. It's not a brilliant book, but it's an entertaining account of modern sorcerers in combat.

Light From A Lone Star

by Jack Vance

Nesfa Press, \$13.00 (hardcover)

Another of Nesfa's small, limited-edition volumes, this time honoring the Guest of Honor at the 1985 Nasfic (North American Convention). One story is original in this book; the rest are reprints of Vance's early work. There's an introduction by Russell Letson; an interview with Vance by Tim Underwood; and "A Vance Encyclopedia," which is simply a few pages of descriptions taken from various Vance novels and which "gives the reader only a glimpse at the wealth of detail contained in novels." It seems a bit pointless, aside from the question-

able grammar. The stories are "The Men Return" (Earth, which has drifted into an area of complete randomness, returns to cause and effect), "Hard-Luck Diggings" (Magnus Ridolph solves a series of murders on an alien planet and shows why I never liked the Ridolph stories), "First Star I See Tonight" (a complicated astronomical murder with a nice kicker at the end), "The Potters of Firsk" (diplomat solves problem of alien creature — well done), "Noise" (solitude versus normal human cacophony — a minor story), and "Cat Island" (four pages and a synopsis of what might become a nicely ironic story). A good sample of Vance's short fiction; unfortunately, most of his best work has been done at novel length, and the excellent stories from *The Dying Earth* have been reprinted too often to be included here.

The Planets

edited by Bryon Preiss

Bantam, \$24.95 (hardcover)

A collection of facts, fiction and artwork about the solar system. There are sections on each planet, plus one on our moon and one on asteroids and comets. Each section is divided into essays and fiction, plus at least one full-page full-color painting and a similar photo. Most essays and a few of the stories have additional artwork, all of which is excellent; it's a very pretty book. The factual essays are fairly brief; they average about twelve pages each. Since they use the latest information available, they make a good overview of our knowledge of the solar system, though they're not detailed. Authors are Ursula Marvin, G. Jeffery Taylor, Michael Carr, Joseph Veverka, David Morrison, Dale Cruikshank, Robert Silverberg, Clark Chapman, and William K. Hartmann,

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plus introductions by Preiss, Andrew Fraknoi, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke.

The Mercury story is "Transcript: Mercury Program," by Frank Herbert, which contrasts a lowest-common-denominator program about manmade solar flares with a scientific experiment with flares. It's not very effective. For Venus, there's "Big Dome," by Marta Randall; humans living in an abandoned dome which was built at the beginning of the terraforming of Venus. It would have been better without the prologue, but it's a reasonably good story of humans reverted to barbarism in a strange environment. "After the Storm," by Harry Harrison, is laid in a future isolationist U. S. and is very well done. "Handprints on the Moon," by William K. Hartmann, is a minor tale of U. S. and Russian cooperation while the scientists are out from under the thumbs of the politicians. Ray Bradbury has written an additional *Martian Chronicles* story, "The Love Affair"; it's nicely ironic and very typical of the author. "The Future of the Jovian System," by Greg Benford, is more of a speculative essay than it is a story; I couldn't get interested. "Dreadsong," by Roger Zelazny, is the Saturn story; it concerns the desire to communicate, and an alien contact which wasn't quite made. Uranus gets two stories. "Uranus, or UFO versus IRS," by Philip José Farmer, is a satirical comedy and one of the more entertaining stories in the book. "Dies Irae," by Charles Sheffield, gets into the concept of free will and is possibly the most entertaining story there. Jack Williamson's Neptune story, "At the Human Limit," is set in the same background that he used for *Lifeburst*, and is badly flawed by the fact that the publisher omitted at least a paragraph, and possibly a

page, from the middle of the story. A particularly egregious case of bad proofreading, part of the plague which has descended on science fiction in the last fifteen or so years. "Sunrise on Pluto" is Robert Silverberg being ponderously philosophical. Overall, I'd say not to buy this one yourself, but bug your library to get a copy.

Imaginary Lands

edited by Robin McKinley
Ace, \$2.95 (paperback)

A collection of original fantasies. "Paper Dragons," by James P. Blaylock, takes the book title seriously; it's more of an exercise in imagination than it is a story. "The Old Woman and the Storms," by Patricia McKillip, is similarly imaginative, with a background of Australian aboriginal myth. "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," by Robert Westall, is an amusing tale of strangeness in England, which seems to promote oddities more than any other country. "Flight," by Peter Dickinson, is a fascinatingly ironic history of the Empire of Obanah, "latterly the People's Obate of Obanah," and its struggle with the intransigent White Rock tribe. "Evian Steel," by Jane Yolen, is another Arthurian tale from the woman's viewpoint. "Stranger Blood," by P. C. Hodgell, is a struggle against evil and darkness, set in a feudal society. It reads like an episode from a novel, though it's a complete story in itself. And better than most of the type. "The Curse of Igamor," by Michael de Larrabeiti, is a fable involving a spirit horse, an evil lord, and a wandering do-gooder. I disliked it; there's nothing there. "Tam Lin," by Joan Vinge, is a standard prose version of the old ballad; acceptable but not exceptional. "The Stone Fey," by Robin McKinley, is an excellent story in which a girl

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dreams of an impossible love but settles for practicality. Overall, it's a good collection, with the Westall, Dickinson, and McKinley stories outstanding.

Tailchaser's Song

by Tad Williams

Daw, \$15.95 (hardcover)

This attempts to do for cats what *Watership Down* did for rabbits, and doesn't quite make it, though I'm sure it will be a good seller. The dust jacket alone, by Michael Embden, will sell copies. Tailchaser, a young tom, goes off to find his vanished true love, and to investigate strange and sinister events in catland. I think the author errs in making the cats too much like humans, emotionally; they're not, you know. He's produced an excellent alien society, with social organizations, history, myths, and ballads; but he never convinced me that it was a feline society. His characters are small furry humans, not cats. The enormous amount of background detail is excellently done, and it's not a bad book; it's just not a brilliant one. (People who believe that cats are small, furry humans will undoubtedly not have my objections, and will probably love the book.)

After The Flames

edited by Elizabeth Mitchell

Baen Books, \$2.95 (paperback)

Three novellas reprinted from recent magazines, about a future U. S. after a disaster. "The Election," by Robert Silverberg, depicts a U. S. shattered by war and starting to rebuild. The two opposing ideas are, first, an immediate return to national democracy, and second, the setting up of regional states, including dictatorships, to be gradually assimilated later. Regionalism wins (John W. Campbell would

have loved it), partly because the democratic protagonist never thinks of the major defects of strong-man rule. (Like, what happens when the noble, capable dictator dies? Only Spain and perhaps Turkey have managed to handle that one, out of hundreds of examples.) "World War Last," by Norman Spinrad, is a lovely romp which involves gun-running, the cold war, and the Middle East. Completely unserious, and great fun. "When Winter Ends," by Michael Kube-McDowell, is really two stories: one of the men who fail to stop nuclear war, and one of the few survivors, years later when the nuclear winter wanes, and of a space launch which ties the two together.

Dragons, Cows, and Kudzus

by Suzette Haden Elgin

and Randy Farran

Magic Granny Line, Rt. 4, Box 192-E, Huntsville, AR 72740, \$8.50 (cassette tape)

Suzette and Randy singing their own compositions; usually solo but occasionally in a duet. Randy's parody of "Greenback Dollar" should be heard by anyone who attends conventions on a budget, and Suzette's "Where the Emerald Kudzu Twines" is a must for anyone planning to face nature in the raw — or even clothed. A good mixture of serious and humorous material.

The Undertaker's Horse

by Leslie Fish

Off Centaur Publications, Box 424, El Cerrito, CA 94530, \$9.00 (cassette tape)

The second of Leslie's tapes of Rudyard Kipling poetry which she has set to music. Some of these are familiar; "Danny Deever" and "Boots" have been sung for years on the concert stage to tunes quite similar to



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Leslie's. But most of the seventeen songs here have never been sung before. Leslie's voice fits the material, and this time she has a good backup group with her.

Filksinging is a rapidly expanding field of science-fictional interest; in 1978 there were no commercially

recorded filk tapes; now I own fifty-eight, and there are one or two I don't have. It's a form of science fiction as legitimate as movies, and generally more entertaining. (Though of course I'm prejudiced there, as Juanita is a filksinger and has a couple of tapes out.)

by John Gregory Betancourt

Lots of things are happening with me, for those of you who're interested. I just sold my first novel, a fantasy, to Avon. Title (as it stands now) is *The Blind Archer*. I'm learning a lot about New York publishing from it, and will write about my experiences next issue; suffice to say, I'm quite happy about it all. Publishing is far, far different than I'd ever dared suspect.

I'm also trying to branch out in my reading — develop new tastes, new interests. I've begun reading comic books. And engineering textbooks. And railroading books. Surprisingly, I've read very little SF of late — I used to read 4-5 SF novels a week. Somehow, it just doesn't have the same appeal as *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Ah, well. . . .

Here are this month's reviews:

Secret Wars II, parts 1-9

by Jim Shooter *et al.*

Marvel Comics, \$.75 each (#1-8);
\$1.25 (#9)

Comic books have become a recent obsession of mine. Not the owning and amassing of great quantities of them (which is a different disease): I mean just plain *reading* them. I've decided that, of the new comics generally available, I like Marvel's best — theirs have a sophistication and pathos others seem to lack.

The recent limited-series comic *Secret Wars II* details the coming of an omnipotent, omniscient — but not all-understanding — being, and his quest for purpose. His ability to make and unmake things — including the entire universe — puts him far beyond the power of any super-heroes on Earth. Nothing can stop him until he begins trying to become human and starts to understand all that he's seen. And, when he knows the pain of life, what's to stop him from destroying it all to prevent his suffering from happening again?

The scripting is, quite simply, impressive. It's literate, humorous, tragic, and touching at times. It draws all the strands of the Marvel universe together. The characters change and grow. There's death and suffering . . . all the elements of a good story.

I thoroughly enjoyed it. While I don't intend to review comic books again, I felt this series was something special. You'll have to look for it in used-comic shops, since comics are fleeting things on newsstands, and this one will have vanished by the time you read this; but I think you might be pleasantly surprised if you haven't read any comics lately.

A Monster at Christmas

by Thomas Canty

illustrated by Phil Hale
Donald M. Grant, \$30.00

This is a specialty-press book, produced in an edition of 1050 copies, of which mine is #29. It's sort of a long, grisly poem with pretty pictures — in the same spirit as the movie *Gremlins*, only without much humor to leaven it.

I didn't like it. I don't recommend it. I wouldn't even mention it, except that people may see the title and think, "Ah! Something like *The Grinch that Stole Christmas!*" and give it to a young relative for the holidays. It's in pretty bad taste.

However —

The Book of Kane

by Karl Edward Wagner
Donald M. Grant, \$25.00

The Book of Kane is more the sort of book Grant is known for doing: all-out Sword & Sorcery, with color interior illustrations, good paper, and a decent binding. Those familiar with Wagner's character Kane will recognize most of this book's contents: "Reflections for the Winter of My Soul," "The Other One," "Sing a Last Song of Valdesse," and "Raven's Eyrie" — stories taken from other collections, plus "Misericorde," which originally appeared in a gaming magazine some years ago. They're all solid, well-told tales except for "Misericorde," which I found weak — just a routine revenge tale. Nevertheless, it's a collection well worth having: I plan to reread it, which is more than I do for most books I review.

Emile and the Dutchman

by Joel Rosenberg
Signet, \$2.95 (paperback)

Rosenberg's *Emile and the Dutchman* is the best SF book I've read since David Brin's *Startide Rising*. It has a fascinating, well-developed back-



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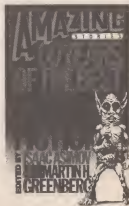
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ground, thoroughly believable — and, better yet, *memorable* — characters, and gripping prose.

The story: Emile von du Mark, after a scandal, is forced to leave the Space Navy Academy and join the Contact Service Academy. The Contact Service is in charge of new worlds and the beings who live on them. After the Xeno War, they have the duty of cutting new worlds off from Earth if they seem potentially hostile to humans.

Emile gets assigned to the Dutchman's ship as part of a Contact Team. (The Dutchman is a drunkard, a bully, and a cheat; he obeys orders as he sees best. And yet he's still the best Team Leader around, as Emile finds out.)

So they go out and contact various worlds, cutting some off from trade with Earth, evaluating others for colonization, on still more negotiating treaties with sentients. On one particularly memorable world, where trees have grown so large they've divided the ground ecosphere from the arboreal ecosphere, they meet a large semi-sentient race of winged, bat-like aliens that seems very friendly in the daylight. But, when night falls:

Something brushed my membrane helmet, like a flurry of dry leaves, but with some weight behind it. I took a step back . . . but there wasn't anything there, not anymore.

"Nightfall," the Dutchman said, and I swear I *heard* him smiling that smile that said, all of a sudden, that he knew something I didn't, something that was about to become awfully important.

Or fatal.

"Condition Blue," the Dutchman said. Attack expected. "Get your weapon free."

Something hit me in the back, not very hard. I turned. Something

thwacked off my membrane helmet again. . . .

Batting at the vague bodies, I turned the floods up full.

The air was filled with them. They boiled out of the nests, off the vines, down from the trees, and blew into the air like an explosion. . . .

I fetched up against a tree, hard, and was batted down to my knees.

It's a good read all the way. Parts are genuinely funny, as when Emile shoots an alien version of a rabbit and immediately names it a . . . no, I won't spoil it!

Recommended.

Tuf Voyaging

by George R. R. Martin

Baen Books, #15.95 (hardcover)

This is one of the oddest new books around — and I loved it! The hero is fat, bald, pallid as a mushroom, sarcastic as Hell, and smarter than everyone else around him. He's also completely honest — which makes for some odd situations, since everyone he meets is corrupt, or at least untrusting.

The plot: Haviland Tuf, a trader, is hired for a routine shuttle mission. The people who hired him have discovered an old Ecological Engineering Corps ship . . . the ultimate weapon of a war a thousand years over. By his honesty and resources, Tuf ends up as sole owner of the ship — and sets out to make a living from it.

The people he meets and helps are a varied lot; some don't want his aid, and others are just after his EEC ship . . . and it's a lot of fun, watching Tuf out-think everyone else. *Tuf Voyaging* is a delightful blend of well-thought-out SF, humor, and pathos. It's easy to see why George R. R. Martin's a popular writer: he's just plain good at it.

Recommended.



Discussions

by the Readers

"Say, professor, how is it that *Amazing® Stories* has several addresses? I'm confused. Can you explain?"

"Glad you asked that question. Letters to the editor, story manuscripts, and anything that concerns the publishers go to *Amazing® Stories*, P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva, WI 53147. Please note that the Philadelphia address that appeared in previous issues of *Amazing® Stories* is no longer current. All manuscripts — be they fiction or poems — should be sent to the Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, address. Finally, subscriptions alone go to an address which will be found elsewhere in this issue."

"Thank you, professor. I'm glad that this kind of dialogue can still be found somewhere."

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

Our apologies to Christopher Brown Kelly, whose name, while perfectly correct with his poem in our March 1986 issue, came out as "Christopher Kelly Brown" on the contents page. Indexers and bibliographers should note this — a salutary reminder, perhaps, of the fallibility of the contents pages.

Dear Sirs:

What is a science-fiction magazine? If it is solely a collection of science fiction, it needs no editorials, no letters-to-the-editor column, no book

reviews. But any science-fiction magazine has these things. So, it is something more than an anthology issued regularly. Some SF magazines contain calendars of science-fiction conventions. One suspects on the basis of a great deal of persuasive evidence that such conventions have much to do with what is known a "fan" activity. Perhaps SF magazines also serve to provide information about the genre & those who are involved with it. If that be so, shouldn't at least one of the magazines give more information about fan activities, including the magazines published by fans? If so, why shouldn't *Amazing®* be that magazine, particularly in view of the fact that *Amazing®*'s owners are patently more interested in the non-SF-reading activities of their magazine's readers than are any other SF publishers?

Yours very truly,
Chas. H. W. Talbot
Seattle WA

We have entertained the thought, but are aware that fans, as distinct from not-otherwise-participating readers of SF, are a minority. And for budding fans, are reviews of fan magazines the necessity that they were in the Good Old Days, when conventions were few and far between? We judge that a trip to any of the conventions (which other magazines list) will provide far more information about fan activities and publications — in short, entry into the world of

fandom — than a whole year of columns about such matters could give. Still, we remain open to persuasion.

— George H. Scithers

Dear Mr. Scithers:

Before you slide too readily into the Dread Heresy of promoting the English system of units above the metric, there's one point you should really consider:

Ever tried to do physics in the English system? Arg! I quiver at the thought of being saddled with units like *foot-pounds* to denote energy or (forgive me!) BTUs. There are still uglier English standards that I won't even dare mention. Once upon a time, a physics instructor told our class, "Now, during this week you're going to work all your problems without using the metric system, just so you can appreciate the agonies our Byzantine ancestors had to go through." Bald men would gnash their teeth for lack of hair to pull.

Still, a guy can have a good old time with units if he tries. An acquaintance once bragged that he could express the answer to any physical problem as the number 42, just by choosing the right set of units to work it in, even though it usually led to atrocities like answers of 42 hectare foot-pounds per fortnight. . . .

Everyone needs a hobby.

Best Regards,

John Postovit

Fargo ND

Doing engineering in the English system has the outstanding advantage that the units are not re-written by a pack of pedantic physicists every month or so, as keeps happening in the all-too-many metric systems.

— George H. Scithers

My Dear Mr. Scithers:

This is the latest version of the various letters I haven't sent to you in the last five years. I have only praise for you, sir. This time I must praise you for allowing Robert Silverberg to goad me this far. I refer, of course, to the January 1986 "Opinion" column.

I started reading science fiction about the time Mr. Silverberg started getting published. I've suffered the scorn of people ignorant of the genre; I've watched science fiction become "respectable." I've even lived to see sci-fi novels on the *New York Times* "best seller," "top-ten" list.

Yeah! That's right. I said sci-fi. The term does *not* offend me. Yet I've read objections to it in all four major science-fiction magazines. Why? Mr. Silverberg condemns the term (echoing much else I've read on this subject) with what I consider a totally unjustified, reverse-apology for science fiction. But — after apologizing for Bradbury, Sturgeon, and Asimov — Mr. Silverberg goes on to condemn the "nitwit Hollywood product," giving as one example *Conan The Destroyer*. And that really ticks me off!

The Conan movies, like Howard's stories, are fantasy. Sword and sorcery. (How about swo-sor?) (pronounced so-so!) Attacking *Conan The Destroyer* makes even less sense than the rest of the article. Not only is *The Destroyer* fantasy, not sci-fi, what's more, it's good fantasy.

Give me a time machine, a color TV, a VCR and two video cassettes. And a portable generator just in case . . . Send me back to June 10, 1936. To a small town in Texas. Let me show Robert E. Howard what Di Laurentiis and Schwarzenegger did with his stories. Let me show him that nitwit Hollywood product just one day before he kills himself. Then let Mr.

Silverberg explain about sci-fi.

With Much Due Respect,
R. L. Nelson
Astoria OR

We offered Mr. Ackerman the opportunity to reply in our pages, but our terms were not acceptable to him.

You are therefore standing in as his champion. . . . The subject is now closed.

Still, we find "sci-fi" a useful shibboleth — you know the story (Judges 12:4-6).

— George H. Scithers

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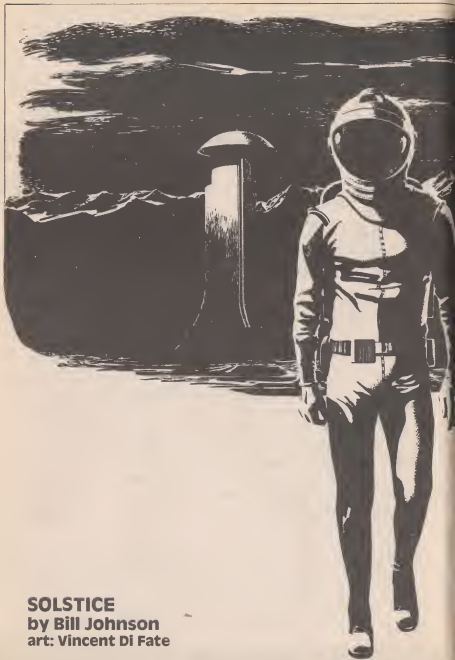
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(Clip & Mail)



SOLSTICE

by Bill Johnson

art: Vincent Di Fate



All his wild times, Bill Johnson tells us, are locked up in his mind. He works as a manager for a computer manufacturer; not too long ago that (let us just remind you) would have been the stuff of science fiction.

The world of the story continues to develop in the author's mind. He would have us know that there is authentic science (the laser) behind it.

This is his first appearance in Amazing®.

On the third day we came out of the hills down to Chryse Planitia.

I stopped the crawler on a ridge and studied the satellite photographs. We were low on oxygen from our time in the hills, and I needed a good source of sand. Maybe a full-blown barchan.

In the old days, before the economic troubles between Union and Belt became a shooting war, we might have gotten our air from a prospector station. Now the only people on Mars lived at the Base. And we made our own oxygen.

The mid-morning sun sliced through a sky that ranged from pearly pink near the horizon to a blue that was almost purple directly overhead. Seventy kilometers above us the dust began to optically pump sunlight. I adjusted my glasses so they were firmly in place over my helmet, and dialed them down to the ten-micrometer band. The Big Laser jumped into focus, a flowing river of power high in the atmosphere.

"It's very strong today," the professor said. I took a deep breath and counted to ten. I respected Takashi, and even more I liked him, which is something quite different. He watched and listened, and you found yourself very quiet when he spoke in his slow, halting voice. But when I forgot he was behind me, he scared the Hell out of me.

"It's high summer," I said. "We're almost to the solstice, to perihelion. We're getting a lot more sunlight than we do in the winter. The Big Laser always gets bigger in the summer."

"They must have launched in the summer, then. When the laser is strongest," Takashi said. I nodded politely.

"Why have we stopped?" Ernst Rama asked. He was a big man, as tall as I was, but bulkier. Mars had thinned me down as my muscles adjusted to a lesser pull. I was just on the medically healthy side of K-loss syndrome.

Rama was a torchship pilot, his body hardened by acceleration and training. If we ever had high-gravity planets to colonize, the colonists might be his cousins. From his accent and conversation, he was a Belter. I wasn't sure how he managed to get the professor and himself down to Mars. The colonel frowned when I asked, and mumbled something about goodwill, a request directly from the Occupation Administration on Ceres. The colonel

didn't sound happy. He didn't like my civilian status, and I'm sure he didn't want two more.

I didn't like Rama. But then, I've never felt comfortable around people my own size. I liked being the tallest person in a room. Looking someone eye to eye was unusual and uncomfortable.

"We're almost out of oxygen. I need to find some sand, so we can re-fill our tanks. The photographs show a field of small barchans about twenty kilometers east of here."

"Barchan."

"A long, crescent-shaped sand dune. The sand inside them has probably never been touched by water. They give the most oxygen with the least trouble."

"Professor?" Rama asked.

"We must reach the area directly beneath the most intensely emitting region of the natural laser by the solstice, Tyler," Takashi said. "There isn't much time."

"There isn't much air left, either. It won't do us much good to get there on time if we're dead."

"I can work with very little oxygen," Rama said. I believed him.

"You aren't paying me enough to make me risk brain damage," I answered. "While we're in the crawler, I command. We need the air, and we can still make the focus on time. The Big Laser isn't going anywhere."

"But —"

"Enough!" Takashi said. Rama shut up. Takashi bowed slightly to me. "If you think you can get us there in time, Captain . . ."

"I do," I said, and winced. No one had called me captain in a long time.

"Then the Rambulbaura can wait just a little longer to be discovered. They've waited so long, a little longer shouldn't matter." Rama looked at me, sullenly, and backed out of the cab into the main compartment. Takashi followed. Just before he left, he touched my arm.

"Don't mistake me, Captain. I'm an old man, and I'm very fond of you, but I don't have a lot of time left to me. We will be there on time."

I locked the door behind me. The solid clunk of the bolt sliding into place made me feel better.

Mars was empty.

Almost.

Twenty kilometers on a photograph was not twenty kilometers on the ground. Chryse looked flat and easy from space. On the surface it was a rock-strewn nightmare, crisscrossed with gullies and trenches and fuljis, broad depressions in the ground where a barchan had eroded away. It took me most of a day to reach the dunes.

I switched the drive into neutral and collapsed back in my seat. Rama opened the door to the cab and studied me.

I'd seen pity enough to hate it.

"I'll get the air," Rama said.

"That's my job," I said. "Get the Hell out of here."

"You're too weak," Rama said.

I don't know which side of the War got to me. I used to hate the Belters, but I wasn't so sure after I saw the massacres on Ceres. War is a dirty business, and the only good thing about it is when it ends. All I knew was that I caught a man-made form of myasthenia gravis. I was strong enough to survive on Mars, but too weak to survive torchship acceleration. I was marooned.

But I was damned if I'd let anyone treat me like a cripple. I struggled out of my harness and pushed my face close to Rama's.

"I do what I'm paid for," I said. "I don't do anything less. Now get out of my way."

Rama shrugged and stepped back. I climbed into the airlock and suited up.

I slaved a robot platform to my suit and loaded the platform from the hold. The platform walked behind me, its metal and plastic legs imitating my own over the rugged ground. Takashi and Rama set up the communications dish to send our daily report. Their voices chopped in mid-sentence as I walked behind a rock outcropping and out of line of sight.

The trick was to find just the right barchan, not too weathered and not too new. Too weathered, and there might be just a little sand over the clay core. Clay jammed the still and fouled the mixing chamber: I knew of several prospectors who died that way. Too new, and the sand might not be aged enough yet, and yield little oxygen.

Some people argued that a living organism, probably a 'bura-engineered mycoplasmid, produced the oxygen. Others pointed out that the 'bura never did anything without a good reason. Since no one could think of a good reason for such an organism on Mars, they maintained their skepticism. They claimed it was a clear case of unusual chemistry, probably initiated by the intense UV.

I didn't care. All I knew was that if I put enough sand in one end of the still, and enough water in the other end, I got oxygen.

Dusk had fallen by the time I found the right dune. I had marked my trail with drops of phosphorescent liquid so I could find my way back to the crawler in the dark. I wasn't worried about getting lost. What did worry me was frostbite. Mars got cold at night, and I wanted to get back to Base with ten toes.

I unslaved the walker and unloaded the still. I drilled to the permafrost for water and set the other nozzle to pull in sand. I flipped the switch.

Sand and water met and reacted. I watched the gauge anxiously until the oxygen needle fell out of red and comfortably back into black.

It was a good dune. I started the compressor to fill the air tanks.

With nothing to do until the tanks were full, I leaned back against the dune and stared at the stars.

You can't really see the stars, I mean really see the stars, any more on Earth. Too many cities, too much light pollution. Even on Mars the atmosphere got in the way. To really see the stars you need vacuum. I remembered my first ship, a midshipman just out of Academy, sent outside to handle a routine repair on a communications dish while we fell from Earth to the Belt. I felt like I could reach out and touch the stars.

I wondered if a 'bura, busy with some strange task, had one day rested on this dune and dreamed of what had been and what might have been.

The still shut itself down and brought me back from my dreams. The tanks were full. I retracted the nozzles and slaved the walker to my stride. The trip back seemed longer in the dark. I came up on the crawler from the rear. Rama and Takashi stood by the satellite dish, arguing.

"We should go on," Rama said as I climbed up the gully to the crawler. He didn't see me. "We can come back for him later. We'll leave food and water and he has the still. We have plenty of air for two people in the tanks. If we miss the solstice —"

"You don't have to tell me," Takashi said. "I feel the same way. But he knows he doesn't get the bonus unless we get there in time. Money is a great incentive. I'd rather have him with us, just in case. How easy do you think it would be to lose our way out here? And if he gets back to Base, it will only cause suspicion. We can't afford to have anyone examine our documents too closely."

"I think we could survive," Rama argued. "I've watched the landmarks. And money can do many things."

I made a lot of noise as I walked up the gully next to the crawler. Rama helped me unload the oxygen into the main tanks and stow the walker and still. Takashi used the dish to report my return. I watched carefully as he transmitted the report, to make sure he really sent it.

Rama complained that he was tired and went to bed. Takashi and I sat in the main compartment and drank hot green tea out of tiny china cups.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" Takashi said. I looked at him for a few moments, and gave a mental shrug. Takashi was professor of xenotechnology during my time at Academy. He helped me get my first billet on a research ship. If nothing else, I owed him honesty. I nodded.

"An honest man is very lonely," Takashi said. "Thank you anyway, but I am not mad."

"Yuhiro, the 'bura are dead. They're gone. All we've ever found is a few metal implements, a handful of artifacts. They were here to visit, they left their rubbish, and they left," I said.

"They are never gone," Takashi said firmly. "They were very much like us, even down to the air they breathed. Every time we find one of their bases we find something we can use. They were a thrifty people. Every tool, every

fragment has at least two uses: an obvious one and something more subtle. The space beacon around Io, the one with a solid iron core, was also part of a power generation scheme. The monopole generator on Ceres was a communicator. And everything of theirs that we find we incorporate into our own technology. Do you think we would have torchships for Rama to pilot without the leftovers of the Ranbulbaura?"

"All right, all right," I said. "They were important. They are important. But they're gone."

"Ah," Takashi said, leaning forward. "They are not here now, true. They left quickly, almost in a panic. Everything we have found points to projects begun, almost completed, then abandoned. A mass evacuation. But how did they leave?"

"They got back in their starships, I suppose," I said, puzzled. Takashi smiled. He reached into his backpack and carefully handed me a package.

Material, black on one side, reflective gold on the other, spilled out. I say spilled, because it was so light and thin it seemed to flow like a liquid, always trying to fall to the lowest level. I held it in my hands, where it pooled like water, and it was as if I held nothing.

"Rama found this a few months ago, in orbit around Titan. We can't duplicate the workmanship, or the material.

"He brought it back to me, to examine. On Ceres. I wasn't very interested until I convinced myself it was authentic Ranbulbaura work. I tried to buy it from him, but he wasn't interested. It was, obviously, part of a light sail. What was the other use? He was willing to pay for the research, and we weren't very busy. Since it was part of a light sail, we began to scan it with various frequencies of light.

"In the ten-micrometer band, with a CO₂ laser, a map appears. It shows the solar system, with Mars marked with a starburst."

"I still don't understand," I said. Takashi stood and yawned. He looked tired.

"The Big Laser. The biggest natural laser in the solar system, up there above us during the day. It lases in the ten-micrometer band, as a CO₂ laser."

We woke to a sandstorm.

I stared out the window and frowned. The sky was not very dark, about as if I wore a pair of sunglasses on a cloudy day on Earth. I let the crawler engine idle while I looked at the forecast from Deimos.

"Just a local disturbance. We should be out of it in a few hours," I said. Takashi sighed and shook his head.

"Always more delays. The solstice is in two more days. We must be there on time," Takashi said.

"I don't understand the problem," Rama said. "The crawler can't work in a sandstorm? Bad engineering. Torchships are built better than that."

I almost told Rama what he could do with his torchship. I restrained

myself. Spacers are always arrogant, and I remembered how long it had taken me to lose the habit.

"My crawler can take us through this with no problem. Except that it covers the sky. How can we follow the greatest intensity of the laser?"

"It slows us down is all, Ernst," Takashi said. "We have detectors that can work through the cover, but it is slower. We must be patient."

I drove slowly as the professor studied the laser. Rama sat behind me. I realized he was studying the controls. I purposely began to do things to confuse him. After a few minutes of that he laughed, slapped me on the back, and returned to the main compartment. I don't think I fooled him for one minute.

Sometimes I made the colonel happy by showing the Big Laser to military brass down from Ceres or Earth. Everyone had heard of it, and it seemed to be the same kind of thing as going to Egypt to see the Pyramids or to Ceres to see the 'bura base.

Mars had just a little atmosphere and a lot of very fine dust high in it. For some reason, over daylight Mars, this dust traps sunlight, at about the four-micrometer band. The dust optically pumps the sunlight up to the ten-micrometer band. Not much of a change, not enough for you to see or notice or to do anything, but enough to qualify as a genuine laser.

The Big Laser peaks over Chryse Planitia. Like I said, it isn't much of a laser, just a general rise in local thermal equilibrium, but if you could concentrate it into one focus you'd have a million megawatts of laser.

Now, if the professor was right, and the 'bura could focus that much power on one point . . .

I shivered to myself. The biggest laser cannon on the Union battleships didn't even generate half a megawatt on target.

"The most intense lasing areas are definitely clustering to the southeast. The Ranbulbaura would most likely build their base under the point of highest natural lasing. If we can find where the distortion is the greatest, at solstice, then we should be able to find their old base," Takashi said. I listened as he and Rama argued over the data and the interpretation. I stopped the crawler and treated myself to real coffee from the professor's private stock. The storm had blown itself out in gray weariness. It was almost noon.

"Captain, I believe we have a set of coordinates for you," Takashi said. He crawled into the cab with me. Rama stuck his head inside to listen.

The destination showed up on the map as a rift valley where a pair of old waterways met to form the bed of an old river. I mapped out a course and showed the professor.

"Now, if we find nothing, I still get paid. That was the arrangement. Correct?" I said. Takashi nodded.

"Correct. But we must get there in time," Takashi said. "I have the telescope and the cameras ready. We will show everyone where the Ranbulbaura have gone. We will prove I am right."

Rama smiled.

Takashi pulled himself back into the main compartment. Rama lingered until Takashi was out of hearing.

"Have you ever thought about light-sail ships, Captain? Everyone thinks of them as quaint toys, but they have their advantages. No fuel, for example. Slow of course, but the acceleration is free and it just builds and builds and never stops," Rama said. "And if you have a powerful laser to launch it, a sail ship is faster than a torchship. And the captain of a sail ship isn't the same kind of man as a torchship captain. We need patience and experience, not just brute strength."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Oh, I think you do," he said. "Takashi may call you captain. I can make you a Captain. If you were my friend."

"I don't understand," I repeated.

"Good night, Captain."

My hands trembled. I needed a cigar. I wanted a drink.

I didn't want to think about Rama. I suspected I knew who he was, and I was sure he could fulfill any promise he made. He wanted the Big Laser very badly.

So did I.

That night I had nightmares about million-megawatt lasers and torchship pilots and the reflection of starlight off a light sail.

We found the building the next day.

I knew the moment we entered the valley that Takashi was right. It was like crossing a hidden boundary. One minute the landscape around us was typical Mars, dotted with dozens of small, half-eroded craters. The next minute everything was smoother and there were no craters. Some old 'bura mechanism was still active, protecting the valley.

We topped a small rise and stopped. According to Takashi the Big Laser was optically pumped to its strongest point just over this valley. It was the day before the summer solstice. Rama and I left the professor inside and set up the telescope to study the valley. We found the building, tucked into a hillside, just before dusk. I drove the crawler next to the building and turned the spotlight on it.

The building was never pre-fabbed in Detroit or Novosibirsk. I saw the 'bura base on Ceres, as a tourist, before it was bombed during the troubles. This place had the same feel, the same placing of line and curve that gave me a headache when I tried to follow it.

"I was never sure," Rama whispered to himself. Takashi had a triumphant grin on his face. I looked at the building and tried to feel happy. A million megawatts of power . . .

Takashi wanted to explore the building immediately. I vetoed the idea. Takashi protested, and I was surprised when Rama supported me.

"We have come so far, and here it is," Takashi complained.

"And where will it go tonight?" Rama asked. "What could you do tonight except stumble around in the dark, get yourself lost, and perhaps lose a few fingers or toes to frostbite? And what if in the dark you accidentally destroy some artifact?"

Takashi paused at that and, grumbling, allowed us to convince him to wait for morning. I started to suit up. Rama touched me on the shoulder.

"I thought we just convinced the professor not to go outside," Rama said.

"I've got to set up my dish. Base is waiting for my report," I said.

"I see," Rama said. He leaned against the wall. I slid my hands inside my heated gloves, adjusted my boots to keep my feet warm.

"And if you don't send out your report? Would Base really expect you to go out at night just to send out your report? Will they really get upset if you miss just one night?" Rama asked.

He wasn't stupid. Base wanted a report every day, but the operators were old hands. They understood about the night and the cold.

"No," I said slowly, "they won't get really upset."

"Why take the risk, Tyler? What have we really found? Nothing as far as we know. Perhaps it's more than nothing, but we don't know that yet. Plenty of time to tell Base later. Or to tell Base nothing. Depending on what we find, Captain."

Rama watched me, careful and alert. For the first time I felt afraid. Not of Rama, he was only flesh and blood, but of myself. That I would betray myself. To really see the stars again. To go home . . .

I took off my gloves. Rama relaxed.

"I can always make the report tomorrow," I said slowly.

Mars was fairly warm that day. We wore air tanks, masks and skintight coveralls instead of full-size p-suits. It felt good to be able to move quickly and cleanly.

The building was really two buildings, one stacked on top of the other. We entered through the dome that made up the top building.

The top building was clean and empty, except for a metal block about a meter high in the middle of the room. A red handle, locked into place by a complicated safety, rested in a notch in the exact middle of the slot. With the safety off, the handle could be moved forward or backward to the top notch or the bottom notch. Rama and Takashi studied the handle and hieroglyphs around it. I climbed down the stairs to the bottom room.

I felt instantly at home. The room was a mess, a clutter of cabinets and glassware. It looked and felt as if the owners had just stepped outside for a breath of fresh air.

Against the back wall was a long metal platform, covered with clear plastic. I walked over to study it. Inside was a model of the Mangala Vallis region, just south of the equator. Fossilized waterways, remnants of the time

when Mars was a wet planet, ran braided channels among and between the barchans. It looked like any of a thousand places on Mars.

As I watched, the model changed. A small dust storm formed, and died quickly. I looked more closely and realized the model was a projection, not an actual model.

Suddenly the sky over Mangala Vallis, in the projection, began to brighten, until I couldn't look directly at it. The Big Laser formed and focused but, instead of firing into space, a thin beam traced a path through the atmosphere to the surface. One of the waterways began to glow red, then white, until the sand turned to glass and evaporated. The hot spot spread, cutting its way through the surface to the ancient permafrost, and below that the ice. A cloud of steam and water vapor jetted to the surface, and condensed into thunderheads.

For the first time in several million years, it rained on Mars.

And where the rain struck the sand, oxygen was released.

The hot spot moved down the ancient waterways, divided and followed them, trailed by a line of rain showers. The view pulled back, began to show more and more of the planet until it seemed I saw Mars from space.

The atmosphere thickened as more water melted, reacted with more sand, and spread. The Big Laser died, destroyed when dust settled out of the thicker atmosphere, but the process it began continued. More time passed and, eventually, a small lake formed near the equator.

It did not freeze, or boil away into near-vacuum. There was now enough atmospheric pressure to let the water stay as water, and the atmosphere had warmed up enough to keep the water above the freezing point.

For a long time nothing seemed to happen, except that more lakes formed and began to connect together to form long narrow seas. Then one day the lakes began to turn from lifeless blue to a slight green. Algae began to breed.

Over the next hour I watched the Rambulbaura transform Mars.

When they were finished Mars was a green place around the narrow equatorial sea. Ice-caps still covered the poles, but trees and grasses flourished on the plains. No 'bura ever appeared. Everything, from the mycoplasמידs in the soil that released the oxygen to the Big Laser that provided the heat, ran automatically.

The Mangala Vallis was partially submerged, now. The projection showed a coastline and some rugged uplands. Trees and shrubs covered the lowland and ran fingers into the high grasslands. Something moved inside the model.

A herd of some kind of animal grazed on the highlands and I watched a school of large fish break water and glitter in the sunlight, briefly, like a school of fireflies on a cloudless night. As I backed away, the projection darkened.

A few seconds later it began again. It showed the original scene now, a lifeless desert of fine dust. It looked like any of a thousand places on the

planet. The Big Laser formed and the 'bura began to change Mars.

I wondered how many times the platform had shown this projection, this birth of a planet, since the last 'bura left. I felt like a burglar who enters a house he knows is empty and finds the lights in a back bedroom are burning. I didn't want the owners to find me here.

Takashi and Rama were still busy with the control in the upper room. I saw they had unlocked the safety, and one wall had become a viewscreen. It showed part of the constellation Leo. Regulus burned brightly in one corner of the screen.

"And if they are in that section, how do we know where?" Takashi said. He gestured to the screen. "It might take decades to search that part of the sky for something as small as a light sail. If I could convince the Union to let me have enough telescope time for a decent search. I'm an old man. I need more proof than this. I need to show them where the light sail has gone. Then I can get enough telescope time to study it."

"And I say if we try to use the control, before we understand it, we're crazy," Rama said.

"If we don't use it, we'll never get another chance," Takashi said. "The Union isn't going to let us back in here. They'll slap a security lid over this so tight I'll never get another chance. We must act now."

Now, this is something I might never understand, but Rama seemed to get a . . . well, a sly look on his face. I got the impression that he'd spent the last hour maneuvering Takashi into just that statement.

"What if we don't tell the Union?" Rama said.

"What?" Takashi said sharply.

"What if we don't tell the Union? What if we keep this secret, just to ourselves and a few other people, until we have a chance to understand it?"

"We can't do that," I said.

"Of course we can," Rama said blandly. "We go back and tell Base that our prospecting expedition was a failure. Most of them think the professor is crazy. No one will be surprised."

"We just leave this place unprotected in the meantime?" I asked.

"I have friends, Captain. They're in a ship in polar orbit around this planet. I took the liberty of sending them a message from the crawler. They're on their way down. They should arrive within the hour."

"I don't understand," Takashi said.

"They have arranged to have an accident that forces them out of orbit. The Union will be suspicious, of course, but my friends will make sure the search takes place on the other side of the planet from us," Rama said.

"And in the meantime your friends will really be right here," I said flatly. "What happens when the Union finds out there was no accident?"

"Oh, but there will be an accident, Captain. The Union will find a wrecked ship, with the proper registry, and even a few corpses. Burned beyond recognition, of course. The Union will not be suspicious. We are

willing to sacrifice a ship to make sure they are not suspicious.”

The more I thought about it, the more I disliked it. It sounded like a plan that would probably work. I briefly wondered where they intended to get the corpses, and decided I didn’t want to know. Rama watched me intently. I noticed his right hand was out of sight, inside his pack. I realized he wouldn’t hesitate to kill me.

I remembered the last War very well. Every time I woke up and I was still on Mars, I remembered the War.

I felt very tired. All I wanted to do was go home.

“I agree,” I said. Rama sighed and pulled his hand out of his pack. He smiled at me, encouragingly. Takashi began to protest. Rama turned to argue with him.

I took two quick steps and jumped. Rama saw me out of the corner of his eye and twisted. I hit him on the side with my knees and drove him to the floor.

The fall stunned him a little, I think. I sat astride him and hit him twice in the throat with my elbow, rabbit punches, to slow him down even more. He hit me once, a groggy man flailing out, and damn near broke my ribs.

He suddenly shook me like a dog shakes off water. I flew off him and against the wall. My head hit the metal, and black and red spots danced a polka in front of my eyes.

It was quiet.

Rama lay in a pile on the floor, all loose and relaxed. Takashi stood above him. He tossed away his flashlight, and I saw the size of the dent in the side of it. Blood flowed from Rama’s forehead. Takashi knelt beside him and took his pulse.

“Strongest man I ever saw,” Takashi said. “He’ll live.”

“Thank you,” I croaked. Takashi came and helped me to my feet.

“What did he offer you?” Takashi said. I looked at him. He smiled. “Old doesn’t mean stupid, Tyler.”

“He offered me a light-sail ship to captain,” I said. Takashi nodded slowly.

“A worthy bribe. Did he lie? Would he have killed you later?”

“Damn you,” I said. “Damn you to Hell and back. I don’t know.”

“You trusted him,” Takashi said, wonderingly.

I nodded. “I’ve met his kind before. A patriot, in his own eyes. I think I would have gotten my ship. I think we would have lived.”

“And the Belters would have the Big Laser,” Takashi said.

“And we would have another war,” I said.

“I know,” Takashi said.

Takashi left me and set up a camera pointing to the screen. He walked back to the control panel.

“That ship is still coming down,” I said. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Even if we get out of the valley, we can’t outrun a ship. They’ll find and kill us before we get to Base,” Takashi said. “They might have more work to

keep it quiet, but they can do it.

"I like Belters, did you know that? I'm almost one myself, I've spent so much time on Ceres. Academy seems like a half-forgotten dream. Rama didn't think he had to bribe me. He was right, of course. I would have helped him stop you, if he hadn't told us the ship was coming down. I can't let either side have the Big Laser yet. Not until I'm finished."

He flipped the last catch on the control handle and turned on the camera. I thought about stopping him, but when I breathed it felt like my diaphragm was afire, and when I moved, I thought I felt bones scrape. I decided I was no match for Takashi.

"One question," I said. He nodded as he made his final adjustments. "What happens if we pull the handle down?"

Takashi frowned and thought for a moment.

"The Big Laser should fire toward the surface, at some pre-selected target. Somewhere south of us, around the equator probably, from the way I think it works."

He slammed the handle forward.

Mars went dark.

I wasn't the only one who said that. Those people at Base who happened to be outside backed me up. And the weather-satellite records show the albedo over Chryse Planitia changed, ever so slightly, for a few moments.

The Big Laser was very weak, hardly anything to notice, but the Ranbulbaura understood it. Some scientists think they found it, others think they created it. I don't know. I suspect that, somehow, they created it. All I know for sure was that they knew how to manipulate it.

I hobbled next to the control panel, so I could see the screen and the outside sky. As I watched the sky, it seemed to brighten as the Big Laser began to focus.

Part of the sky began to shimmer, like waves of heat rising off a road. It began to glow and run up the heat rainbow through red to white to blue to purple to a plasma so bright I couldn't look at it directly.

"It's still working," Takashi said. He sounded like he was barely breathing. I reluctantly turned from the outside sky to stare at the screen.

A beam of light stabbed from Mars deep into the constellation Leo. I knew, intellectually, that this was a simulation, that the beam would only show in an atmosphere.

I knew that, intellectually.

But deep inside me something stirred. The beam soared majestically into the dark, like a brilliant ladder to the stars. And at the end, it touched something. Was it a light sail? I don't know. Again, the light could never have reached any 'bura ship so quickly. The screen was showing us what would happen, not what was happening.

After a few minutes, I shook myself awake, reluctantly, like a swimmer breaking to the surface. I turned and, almost tenderly, struck Takashi

behind the left ear. He folded up peacefully, like a tired child. He had his proof, his photographs. I think he was grateful that I didn't ask him to make the next decision.

Overhead I heard the ragged sound of ship's engines: Rama's friends. They were in trouble. Half-blinded by the laser, I decided, probably coming in on instruments.

I was tired of the killing. I was tired of a War that never seemed to end.

I stopped for a moment. Rama lay still on the floor, breathing easily. I wondered what it would be like to sail away with the Big Laser behind me, filling the canvas. I wondered what it would be like to see the stars clearly again.

I moved the control lever down to the neutral position. The sun brightened and the screen went dark. I thought about the room below, and the projection. Takashi said the Big Laser would fire somewhere near the equator. Mangala Vallis was near the equator. I hoped my assumptions were correct, and I was making the right decision.

I decided that was one of those things you never know for sure.

I pulled the handle to the bottom, and waited for the rains to fall.



FROM A SACRED CHRONICLE

"Jackhammers are the birds of paradise."

Book 1, verse 1: that's what was written.

"The translation of self through sight
into one's surroundings —"

Book 2, verse 1: that's what was said.

"A different taste in jokes is the casus belli."

Book 3, verse 1: that's what was felt.

"Closing the door of time behind you
is a necessary rear-guard action."

Book 4, verse 12: that was discovered.

"Flowers know Augustine's ultimate cause."

Book 5, verse 89: that was the scent.

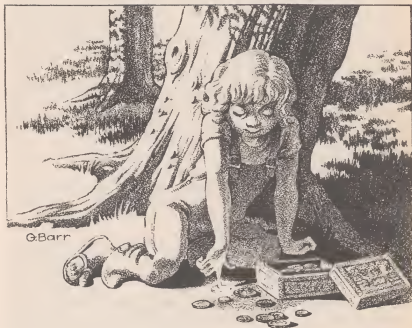
"The moon is a golden finial, and the lampshade
is blue."

Last book, last verse: why are you staring?

— John Devin

MONEY TROUBLE

by Sharon N. Farber
art: George Barr



The last we heard of the continuing saga of Sharon Farber's medical education, she was undergoing post-graduate training in neurology.

The continuing saga of Billy Jean is now a trilogy. "Rolls Rex, King of Cars" and "Billy Jean and the Big Bird" have appeared previously in these pages.

As a rule, when money talks, it says little of interest to a non-monetary audience. Coins, for instance, converse mostly about places they have been — such as pockets, vending machines, and cash registers.

"Velour," the quarter said. "I was in a pair of *velour* jeans once."

"Oh yeah? Well, Marilyn Monroe put me in a paper machine," revealed a 1960 Denver dime. The rest of the change perked up.

"Gosh! What was Marilyn Monroe's pocket like?"

"She had a coin purse," the dime replied smugly.

Billy Jean finished emptying her pocket of chattering change. It was hard for her to imagine another conversation so dull — except perhaps for runners discussing their knee ailments. Not for the first time did the child regret having saved Pennyroyal, King of Coins, from being crushed on the streetcar tracks. Life had been tough enough when she could only understand the language of people and cars. . . .

Cars. "I wish Prince the Valiant was here," the little girl thought. Life could be very boring at Aunt Barbara's commune. She could still hear her lunch money gossiping in the corner.

"Do foreign coins talk funny?" wondered Billy Jean, and left the cabin. Walking through the woods, she came to Moondog's treehouse, and shook the elephant bells.

"Hey Beej, I was just gonna come get you," Moondog said, grinning widely and waving a comic book. "Listen to this."

Flipping open the magazine, he read in a stentorian voice. " 'You cannot hurt me, Baron Wolfstein, for I am prepared!' Wait, wrong panel. Here — 'Your puny wooden stake is no threat. Only *silver* is inimical to all evil!' "

Billy Jean looked at him expectantly.

"Like, that's important. Wooden stakes just kill vampires." He shook his head. "Y' don't wanna wind up like this guy in here. Be prepared, Beej, that's the way to survive. Like, buy utilities as well as growth stocks, y'know?"

Smiling contemplatively, the former stockbroker began to stuff shredded leaves into his clay pipe. "Reminds me of a dude I knew back in the Haight. Siggy. Siggy Fried or Fraud or something. Anyway, back in '67 there was this rumor you could get high smoking banana peels. So Siggy went down to Farmer's Market and like, bought every banana in town."

"Wow," said his rapt audience. Moondog sucked on the pipestem and began hunting his pockets for a match.

"Yeah, he cornered the market. But then he did a bunch of speed and started rapping, and by the time he came down, all the bananas had rotted. The pad was like totally full of mushy brown bananas. It was a disaster. What could I do?" He finally found a match, and lit the pipe.

"So I moved in with my old lady. Like, it's bad karma to manipulate the perishables market unless you got a refrigerator or something."

Pleased at having imparted wisdom to the younger generation, Moondog

continued, "Now Beej, what's the prob?"

"Can I play with your coin collection?"

"Sure." He disappeared into the treehouse. The girl heard sounds of rummaging. An occasional bit of organic debris flew out to become one with the forest floor.

"Hey," Moondog called. "What's it for? Not Show and Tell again?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Jeez." The voice became melancholy. "They put so much pressure on you guys. A real Type-A factory . . ." He reappeared at the door, bearing a small carved-teak box. "Here you go."

Billy Jean returned to the cabin, sat down on the sheepskin rug, and opened the box.

"I say, terribly bright of a sudden," said a shilling. "Reminds me of the searchlights during the Blitz. I was in a khaki pocket with a hole and . . ."

"Ah, *les poches des soldats américains — jamais vides . . .*"

"הייתי מונח כאן כדרך בהפסד רב למטבע חשוב כמוני."

"Yea, even as the brilliance of the coffers of the mighty Pharaoh Rama Tut," piped an oddly-shaped brass coin.

"Hey kid!"

Billy Jean looked deep into the box.

The voice hissed again. "Hey kid."

"Yeah?" She took out the coin and held it to the light. It was old and silver, not quite round; and the letters and face had been worn indistinct by the centuries.

"Hey kid, do you want a magnificent castle?"

"Not really. . . ."

"How about jewels? Jewels as shining as stones of fire?"

She shrugged.

"All right then, a mercenary army to wreak havoc on your foes and raise you to a dukedom?"

She didn't like some of her kindergarten classmates (especially mean old Davey Epstein), but that sounded a bit drastic.

"What's the matter, you don't want riches beyond compare?"

She pondered this. "If I had lots of money, maybe Mommy would take me traveling, instead of leaving me with Aunt Barbara all the time."

"Well, there you are," said the coin triumphantly. "I'm your ticket to wealth. I was part of a buried treasure trove."

"Wow!"

"All of us lying in a cramped, dark, moldy casket, gasping for air . . ."

"How'd you escape?" asked the girl.

"Don't interrupt. Anyway, I swore to liberate my brothers from their harsh imprisoning tomb."

"Where are they?"

"Oh, on the beach."

"Gee, the ocean is miles from here," said Billy Jean. "We're in a forest."

"Did I say *beach*? I meant *beech* — you know, a tree. Come on, take me outside."

They exited the cabin, the silver coin saying, "I'm sure I'll recognize the right tree when I see it."

As always, the dogs were fascinated by her digging, jumping in and out of the hole and trying to fill it back up. The little girl threw down the shovel and plopped to the ground, staring disgustedly at the coin.

"It's not here, Bob."

"Oh well," answered the coin. "Try that tree."

She shook her head. "Nuh-uh. I've been digging holes under trees for three days now. Know what I think? I think you *fibbed*."

"I beg your pardon!"

"I don't think you got a treasure."

Bob was silent for a moment, then said in a subdued voice, "Okay, you caught me. I lied. But I couldn't stand that box anymore. It's dark and smelly and full of creeps. I had to get out and see the world. I've been locked up since the last Crusade. Surely a greater destiny awaits me.

"Please don't put me back. Pleecease?"

"I don't wanna talk to you anymore."

She put the coin into a pocket of her dungarees and stalked back to the cabin. Passing an open window, she could hear the commune discussing something.

"Billy Jean's been doing *what*?" Tony was yelling.

Ducking down, she crawled under the window to listen.

Aunt Barbara replied, "According to her teacher, she's been digging holes all over the schoolyard."

Tony said, "Aw, who cares what that dried-up old Miss Phosphor says? She was my kindergarten teacher, and she was a prune then."

Barbara continued, "She claims Beej said a coin told her to do it."

Moondog's deep voice added, "Hey, the kid's got a good imagination. I did acid once and money talked to me. Said stockbrokers were exploiting currency-Americans. Changed my whole life."

Ignoring the digression, someone said, "Remember when she thought cars talked?"

"I don't remember that," said Sunflower's new boyfriend Josh. "Guess I was stoned or in Fresno or something."

"But that's not all," said Barbara's voice. "During their big standardized IQ test, Billy Jean was sitting by the milk-money box. She stood up and started screaming 'Shut up, I can't concentrate!' at the box."

There was silence. Then Moondog said huskily, "Bad vibes. Real Type A. It's all that stress they put on 'em to be, like, tops at Show and Tell, so they can get into a good college."

"Yeah," Josh agreed. "If you don't do good in kindergarten, you can't get into Berkeley."

Barbara sighed. "They want us to, well, 'get her some help.'"

The phrase hung ominously in the air, then all six voices began at once. "How about psychodrama?"

"No, gestalt rebirthing. You lie in this pool. It's really a trip."

"Holistic conscious breathing. It helped me."

"Nah. Guided Aquarian imagery fixation therapy."

"There's a witch doctor from Botswana land downtown near the bank . . ."

"No!" declared Barbara. "The school will want something that sounds straight."

"Yeah, like primal emotive growth counseling."

"Yeah, like that."

Moondog said sadly, "She really just needs to get in touch with her past lives."

Springing up onto the window sill, Billy Jean put her fists on her hips.

"I won't go," she hollered. "I won't go to the doctor!"

Amazed, Bambooshoot looked at the others. "Far out," he said. "Now there's an idea! What about a *doctor*?"

The little girl sat grumpily in the space between the bucket seats, refusing to speak to the commune members, all stuffed into the old Valiant.

"Don't be so down, Beej," said the car as they sped down the mountain. "I went to the doctor once; had all my valves reamed out. I was laid up for days, but it didn't hurt a bit." Receiving no answer, he concentrated on the road.

The doctor practiced in a redwood A-frame a few miles outside Las Pulgas, on a small hill overlooking the ocean. They parked beside the semi-attached geodesic dome and went in, Moondog admiring the carved sign.

"'Dr. Energie, Psychic Psychoanalysis.' Heavy."

The waiting room featured cushions and a redwood slab table covered with ancient issues of *More Existentialist Fun Comics* and *Organic Home and Garden*. As they sat, Barbara trying to interest Billy Jean in a cartoon about pirates, a runner bounded in from outside and stopped short at the sight of visitors.

He was a medium-sized man with bushy brown beard and hair. His stylish running ensemble had leather elbow patches. "Wow!" he said, bouncing up and down in place. "Hi, I'm Doctor Energie. What a great extended family. So what can I do for you? Household counseling? Collective dream interpretation? Self-actualization? No — carrot juice!"

They followed him into his office and watched as he made carrot juice. When they all had chairs and a drink, the doctor fell onto a leather couch and said, "Okay, lay it on me."

Billy Jean looked suspiciously at the wall behind him. There were many

little trophy statuettes of runners, a few diplomas and certificates, and a framed ink blot labeled *Mom*. Billy Jean knew all about doctors. They acted friendly and real interested, and the moment you turned your back, bam! A needle in the arm.

"It's my niece, Billy Jean," Barbara explained. "Her kindergarten teacher said we had to get her some help."

"Miss Phosphor, eh?" The physician leaned towards the child. "Having a little trouble with adjustment, are we?"

"No," said Barbara. "She hears voices."

Dr. Energie sat bolt upright, his smile frozen solid. "Voices?" he asked, a cold, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Voices?"

People who hear voices can have nasty, incurable disorders. The thought that he might have to treat someone who really needed help frightened Dr. Energie, . . .

"Voices," chorused Barbara and Tony and Moondog and Bambooshoot and Sunflower and Josh.

. . . but then again, books about treating schizophrenics generally sold very well. Especially if you had a new and interesting and easily comprehensible theory, which Dr. Energie did. He thought voices were leakage from The Other Side, and anyone whose right brain was sensitive enough to pick up those messages must possess a genuine storehouse of psychic power. A storehouse that could be tapped . . .

"But they're friendly voices," said Billy Jean.

"Whoa, heavy duty." The doctor suddenly beamed and held up an index finger. "I know! We'll consult with the number-one head expert of all time." He leaned in conspiratorily.

"We'll hold a séance and contact — the ghost of Sigmund Freud!"

They sat in a circle, linking hands about the homemade beeswax-and-patchouli candle. Flickering light made the bookshelves and the faintly glowing diplomas seem ominous.

Dr. Energie's palm was soft and warm, while Barbara's was cold and moist. Billy Jean wished she were at home watching "Bullwinkle."

The doctor had just led them through some mind-clearing exercises, and now they were all concentrating on their mantras. Billy Jean's mantra was *Fanmail from some flounder?*

"Now everybody concentrate on Freud, okay? Form an image in your mind. Sig-mund. Sig-mund."

The others took up the chant, from Moondog's bass up to the silvery little voice of Bob the coin, in Billy Jean's back pocket.

"Sig-mund. Sig-mund. Sig-mund."

"Sig-flaming-mund!" said Moondog.

The candle seemed to be shrinking in upon itself. Something was glowing in the dark center of the room, right above the muted flame.

"Holy Jung, it's working," whispered Dr. Energie. "Keep chanting!" He began to intone above the Sigmund chorus: "We summon the eternal spirit of Sigmund. There is a troubled child who needs your help. Sig-mund. Sig-mund. Come, guide us through the tangled thicket of the unconscious. Illuminate the id. Explicate the ego — Huh?"

The glow had coalesced into a figure, flame leaping up in a thin column to feed it. Second by second, the apparition was becoming larger, more substantial.

It was a man, slouching in midair. His skin was fire. Denim jeans and a ragged vest covered the emaciated, burning flame. He had a beaded headband, and a leather thong with bells was about his ankle. Two tiny horns peeked out of the limp, shoulder-length hair.

The figure looked down on them, opened a mouth that harbored only a few unhealthy teeth, and began to chuckle.

"That's not the ghost of Sigmund Freud," cried Sunflower. "That's a demon!" She began to mutter a long-neglected prayer.

Dr. Energie gauged the apparition with a professional eye. "Yes; it's a speed demon."

Moondog called, "Siggy? Far out. Like, I heard you overdosed in '68."

The figure's soft voice was like nails on a blackboard. "I did."

"Yeah, and man — y'know that ousley acid you sold me? That was just sugar. Like, you *burned* me."

The demon grinned. "And I'm going to burn you again, Oswald. All of you. I'm going to drag you and your friends down into the flaming pit, where you will roast for all eternity."

Moondog sadly shook his head. "You always were a real downer, Siggy."

"Break contact," shouted Dr. Energie, reaching over to snuff out the candle. Tony leapt up to turn on the electric lights.

In the cold fluorescent light, the demon looked more tangible than ever. Hovering in midair, he grasped Barbara's long blond hair. "She shall be the first to go."

"Leggo of me!"

Billy Jean, peeking out from under the desk, stared at the panicking adults. Tony and Dr. Energie were pulling Barbara's arms, and Sunflower was now screaming her rosary; Josh was trying to open the door, and Moondog was attempting threatening Tai Chi maneuvers; Bambooshoot seemed to be going catatonic again. Then Billy Jean remembered the words from Moondog's comic book.

Only silver is inimical to all evil.

Reaching into her pocket, she found a marble, two pieces of carob candy, a whistle, and finally the silver coin. "At last," cried Bob, as she pulled the coin into the light. "Now shall I make my mark upon history! I strike for right!"

She threw him at the laughing demon. The bright coin spun through the

air, striking with a flash of light and a puff of brimstone.

When their eyes recovered, the demon was gone. The others huddled on the scorched floor, Barbara massaging her scalp. Billy Jean looked sadly at the ashes that had been her friend the coin.

Moondog turned to Dr. Energie, busy opening windows. "Wow, man. What was *in* that carrot juice?"

"Down the hall, third door on the left," directed the receptionist, so Billy Jean went up the hall and to the right, exploring University Hospital's Department of Child Psychiatry. She heard a plaintive mewing from behind a door marked **No Admittance**.

Slipping into the room, she saw a large laboratory, its counters piled high with bottles, glassware, papers, and electronic devices. A scrawny, long-haired gray cat in a cage sat gazing impassively at Billy Jean. It mewed once. Standing on tiptoes, the girl opened the cage. The cat emerged, stretched leisurely, butted Billy Jean once with its head, then stalked over to the open window. It paused there, licking a paw while pale green eyes examined the child.

"Thanks, kid," said the tabby. "On behalf of the King of Beasts . . ."

"Isn't the King of Beasts s'posed to be a lion?"

"He's just the figurehead. You ever tried talking to a lion? Irish setters have more smarts. Kid, you're looking at the power behind the throne."

Billy Jean nodded sagely. It made sense.

"Anyway, on behalf of his most august and serene (ha!) majesty, etcetera etcetera; for performing a meritorious rescue at great personal risk and so on: I grant you the ability to comprehend the speech of animals." The cat turned and hopped out the window.

"No, wait!" cried the girl. "That's how I *always* get into trouble. . . ." But the cat was gone.

She shrugged and went back to the waiting room. "Good, you're back," the receptionist said, ushering her into the doctor's office. She'd become anxious when Billy Jean had been gone so long, because she knew Doctor was especially interested in the case. He'd told her so that morning: "Little hippy child, teacher says she hears voices. Could be childhood schizophrenia. Could be very important case — demonstrate importance of unsavory environment in creating breakdown to primary process. Could confirm psychoanalytic doctrine. Tragic case. Could be best seller, though."

After examining the aquarium full of goldfish and an awesome collection of play-therapy toys, Billy Jean sat down opposite the doctor, who introduced himself and his hand puppet. They were both avuncular.

"So," the hand puppet said. "Billy Jean. I understand that you . . . *hear voices*."

The question seemed full of hidden implications. Billy Jean sat silently, kicking her heels back and forth.

"Do you hear voices?" insisted the puppet.

From the aquarium, a big orange goldfish suggested, "Say no."

"No," said Billy Jean.

The psychiatrist leaned back with a wide grin, the hand puppet belatedly copying him. "Then this won't take long," they promised.

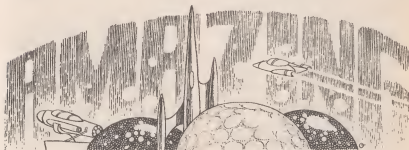
Billy Jean answered a few more questions, did some puzzles, made up stories about ink splatches, and then the doctor took her into the waiting room.

"No shots?" the girl asked.

"No shots," said the doctor, and he shook hands with Tony and Barbara.

"Your niece is perfectly normal, except for a particularly vivid imagination," he said, leaning over to pat Billy Jean's head. "In fact, you're a very bright, very charming young lady."

"Thanks," the child replied. "And I like you better than Sigmund Freud."



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How often has this happened to you? You saw a new book in the bookstore. Cover, cover copy, author's name all looked great, so you grabbed it, got it home, and only then discovered that the thing was Volume 2 in a series, and you can't find the others. If you've missed that particular frustration, you're luckier than I am.

Fantasy and science fiction run to series novels. Some of them are much-loved and venerable, such as Asimov's *FOUNDATION* novels (no longer a "trilogy" and now interleaved with his robot stories), Heinlein's *FUTURE HISTORY*, or Tolkien's *LORD OF THE RINGS*, or as stylistically and intellectually rigorous as Le Guin's *EARTHSEA* trilogy or Gene Wolfe's *BOOK OF THE NEW SUN*. Others . . . well, you've seen novels bloated into trilogies and trilogies that sprout fourth or fifth volumes.

What's caused this? The quick answers are predictably cynical. "Series books sell," I've been told — and shown. Or, as one writer said, "Because once you figure out the background, you don't have to waste time and can get right down to the story."

But fantasy and SF ran to series novels long before the current obsessions with marketing, salesforce, and the bottom line. This makes me suspect that there's something about the series concept that has very little to do with publishers' balance sheets — and a lot more to do with what some

of our finest and most popular writers are trying to do with their work.

Let me admit right away that there's no way I can cover even the classic fantasy and SF series, let alone the many fine new ones (in SF, C. J. Cherryh's emerging future history; in fantasy, the works of David Eddings, Judith Tarr, R. A. MacAvoy, and a worthy host of others). I'm not going to try.

What I want to do is touch on some of the most popular and influential series and suggest some reasons for their popularity.

Take, for example, four classic SF series by Asimov, Heinlein, Gordon R. Dickson, and the late James Blish. Asimov has recently produced *The Robots of Dawn* and *Robots and Empire*, Heinlein, *Friday* and *The Cat That Walks through Walls*, and Dickson, *The Final Encyclopedia* — with *The Dorsai Companion* to follow from Berkley and rumors of his next novel in the *CHILDE CYCLE*, *Chantry Guild*, to tantalize fans.

Each one of these series goes beyond plotting or wonder-mongering to examine the philosophical concept that gives these books a focus and value beyond fun reading. In Asimov's series, it's the idea of psychohistory, which predicts and tries to modify the rise and fall of civilizations. With Heinlein, the idea may be mankind as mythmaker; his *FUTURE HISTORY* has turned quirky and solipsistic as his heroes leap barriers of time and universes to create and recreate

themselves. Blish's stories of cities turned spaceship (and have you ever noticed how much his Mayor Amalfi of New York resembles current mayor Ed Koch?) take his arch-survivors through the "decline of the West" posited by philosopher Oswald Spengler — and show that their essence transcends even entropy. Dickson intends his *CHILDE CYCLE* to chronicle the development of humankind from its medieval stage of "childe" or knight-aspirant, to moral and creative adulthood as what he calls Responsible Man.

Other SF series tend more to worldbuilding. Two stellar examples are Frank Herbert's *DUNE* series, now millennia and several hundreds of Duncan Idahos removed from the original, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *DARKOVER*. Think of *DUNE*, and you think of thirst, plots and paranoia. Protect the integrity of your stillsuit. Don't sit with your back to a door. Think of *DARKOVER*, and you think of magic under the light of four moons, surviving the ferocious Hellers, avoiding the Dry Towns; and you ponder the Amazon's Oath. Nice places to visit — and sometimes you think you've actually been there.

With some series, it's hard to tell whether they're fantasy, SF, or adventure. Take two very different examples, Robert Adams's *HORSECLANS* series, recently augmented by *A Man Called Milo Morai*, and Gene Wolfe's grotesque and magnificent *BOOK OF THE NEW SUN*. This brooding story of a torturer turned autarch — tyrant and self-ruler — combines the lyricism of Jack Vance with the ferocious concentration on morality that one expects in fantasy series. As soon as he finds a publisher, Wolfe hopes to bring out *The Urth of the New Sun*, which

tells of Severian's attempt to bring a new sun to the ancient world he rules.

Then there are the straight fantasy series. Some concentrate on the opposition between good and evil that Tolkien and C. S. Lewis did so well. Andre Norton's *WITCH WORLD* series, for example, pits young men and women against moral dilemmas and dangers, some of which they've walked into and others of which they've inherited. Katherine Kurtz's Deryni novels combine sorcery with a good/evil dualism unmatched since the Middle Ages themselves.

Other fantasies are more ambiguous. Le Guin's much-stressed Taoism causes her to portray good and evil in her *EARTHSEA* trilogy as a delicate equilibrium within her characters' minds and hearts. And then we have the late E. R. Eddison's visions of Zimiamvia, four spectacular novels (*The Worm Ouroboros*, *Mistress of Mistresses*, *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, and *The Mezentian Gate*) that aren't as well-known as they should be, probably due to Eddison's fondness for writing sixteenth-century-type English. In these books, Eddison's heroes and heroines are all Machiavellian avatars of gods and goddesses, while his villains are deep-dyed thugs who enjoy their own evil almost as much as the readers.

In each of these series, the magic created by the authors reflects the way their characters look at their worlds. Norton's Witches and warriors, like Kurtz's Deryni, know that there's good and bad magic — though the wisest of them suspect that good and evil magic are merely aspects of the same power — which is what Le Guin's archmage learns too. Eddison's magic resembles his characters in whim, pleasure, and unpredictability.

What makes these series so attractive — aside, of course, from their bottom-line value to publishers? I suspect that a development that started in the late 1970s will help me explain. I'm referring to *THIEVES' WORLD*, the first and still the most powerful of the "shared world" anthologies. Its first volume created an agreeably scroungy world of cutpurses, hired bravos, and amoral mages. Things went rapidly downhill from there (to a *THIEVES' WORLD* author, that's a compliment!) until right now there are eight volumes of short stories and novelets (most recent: *The Dead of Winter*, in 1985, and *The Soul of the City*), two-thirds of Janet Morris's trilogy about mercenaries, and the promise from Andy Offutt of *Shadowspawn*, the tale of a thief turned reluctant hero.

Naturally *THIEVES' WORLD* spawned shared worlds at almost every publisher: Tor's *ITHKAR*, Ace's *LIAVEK*, Baen's *HEROES IN HELL*, and DAW's Merovingen stories (developed from C. J. Cherryh's 1985 hardback, *Angel with the Sword*). But so far, *THIEVES' WORLD* has remained preëminent, largely because its writers have moved beyond fun and mayhem followed by beercall at the Vulgar Unicorn to a strongly unified storyline that involves characters that readers come to care for.

The interactive nature of these stories works to draw readers in. "Can I play too?" they ask.

More and more often, the answer is "yes." So far, Marion Zimmer Bradley and the Friends of Darkover have produced three anthologies, with a fourth to come. And now Robert Adams and Andre Norton are opening their worlds too. Readers are turning into co-creators.

Why? For one thing, it's fun to play on other people's planets. But I've noticed that any time I start on this tack, someone always says, "This isn't new to SF. Look at the Sherlock Holmes pastiches." Sure. Glad to. But if we're talking about tradition, let's go all the way back to where fantasy and SF really start . . . with classical epic and medieval romance. After all, Homer didn't sit down with a scroll and just grind out the *Iliad*. He drew on a great wealth of Bronze Age epic. And Sir Thomas Malory didn't hatch up the stories of King Arthur as occupational therapy while he was in prison; he had a "French book" and a good thousand years of Arthurian lore to draw on — the same lore that many writers are using right now.

Medieval writers had a word for this sort of thing. They called it "matière" — which we translate as "matter," but might be better viewed as a very well-known fantasy universe in which any writer was welcome. Certain of these "matières" were better known than others. One twelfth-century Frenchman picked out the three major ones: the "Matter of Antiquity" (Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, etc.) which was full of wisdom; the "Matter of France" (Charlemagne and his paladins) which was *true* (I told you he was a Frenchman); and the "Matter of Britain," which was worldly and pleasant.

Readers' fondness for series novels and shared world anthologies makes me suspect that we are developing some new "Matters" of our own, while retaining our pleasure in the old ones. If you accept this premise, then it stands to reason that Marion Zimmer Bradley, who opened her universe up to other writers, also produced the Arthurian novel, *Mists of Avalon*, and is now working on *The*

Firebrand, set during the Trojan War — and that some of the *THIEVES' WORLD* players are as happy with stories set in ancient and medieval times as in worlds of their own creation, which were influenced by the older ones, in any case.

These writers are used to playing in other people's universes. They like it.

Because the old stories don't just

sell. They last.

So, will *Amazing*® run ads for what may turn out to be the next *Iliad*? Ask me again in a couple of centuries. By that time, what academics like to call "the test of time" will have winnowed out the good series from the junk. And meanwhile, we've got a lot of series to catch up on.



ONE TRANSLATION OF ODYSSEUS

Trouble is the name,
A gunslinger drifting
From town to town, scattering
Pain like bullets and collecting
Pain until it clings dust-thick
To his clothes.
How strangely it grows,
Black root to white flame flower.

Wily, Zeus-sprung, lying Odysseus,
"Old knife," Achilles calls him
In the long dark of death
Where even the echoes tremble
Before black silence,
And love twitters on the edge of blood.

Old knife — he cut the ocean
In slashing ships and sailed
Into a name.
Sailed out of the bleak cave, black world, bright sea,
Sailed into a name —
Trouble.

— Ace G. Pilkington

THE WINDS OF OBERON

by Brad Strickland
art: Bob Walters



© 84 Walters

Brad Strickland sold his first SF story in 1981 to George Scithers. Since then he has placed close on twenty more. His work has appeared in Ellery Queen's, Asimov's, Fantasy & Science Fiction, and now Amazing®. He has completed an SF adventure novel, To Stand Beneath the Sun. He lives in Georgia with his wife and children.

Jaycie Conover, intent on the scurrying pink animal in front of her, leaned into a ninety-kilometer-per-hour gale. By Oberon standards it was a light breeze. Matt Wilkes, watching her through the skimmer canopy, felt glad he was a pilot and not a scientist.

Jaycie's voice crackled over the communicator: "I've got the helmet video pickup on. Are you taping?"

"I'm getting it," Matt said, one eye on the monitor screen, the other on the wingfan pressure readout. "Don't let the critter bite." Not that the animal looked dangerous: it was half a meter long, half of that a ratlike tail, with six sprawling legs ending in padlike clutches — evolutionary strategy to keep it from blowing away, no doubt. From its conical snout twitched stiff whiskers. Its eyes were slits, protection from windblown grit. It had no obvious external ears.

Yet somehow it sensed Jaycie. When she was still ten meters away, the animal went rigid, turned toward her, quested with its whiskers. Then it whirled head-on into the wind, lashed its tail, and vanished.

"Where is it?" Jaycie yelled, instinctively reaching for the energy-pistol holstered at her side.

Matt looked through the canopy. "It went past you! Turn left — look in the air!"

Jaycie turned her back to the wind. On the monitor a pink globe, the animal dangling from it hindquarters-first, flashed briefly, then disappeared over a hill. Jaycie's voice was puzzled: "What did it —"

"It inflated its tail!" Mark laughed. "Its tail caught the wind like a balloon, and zoom! it was off."

"Survival adaptation. That means predators. Funny we haven't seen any carnivores." Jaycie switched off the video transmitter and lumbered back to the skimmer. "Now if you're *quite* ready, pilot."

"Aren't you putting the holos in the cargo bay?"

"Just the tripod and camera. This time the holos ride with me." Matt winced. She still had not forgiven him for the loss of her first set of films. She swung the heavy container up into the copilot's seat, then followed. "You won't get rid of these as easily as you did the last ones." Jaycie slid the cannister into the storage bay beneath her seat — a tight fit, but she succeeded. "Let's go."

She checked the time as they took off. Matt knew she was worried about the deadline. Captain Hesseltine, nervous about the stability of the dormant volcanic caldera where the expedition lander sheltered from the eternal winds, would take off in sixty hours whether they were aboard or not. Planetary landings were more expensive than a skimmer and two crew members. If he and Jaycie had not returned by takeoff — well, they could look forward to a short, unhappy life together on Oberon.

But they made progress, nine stops in ten hours, collecting specimens and holos of the major types of plant life on the wind-whipped continent the

planet's discoverers had waggishly named Zephyr. Matt did not complain, though once, lifting the skimmer over a driving front of white cloud and black rain, he grunted, "I can understand why there are no birds on this damn planet. Wind'd strip their feathers off."

"We've seen two semi-flying species," Jaycie said, yawning. "The balloons and the tumble-insects."

"Those bubbly green things? Yuck."

"They probably think the same of you."

Matt rode the downslope of cloud like a tobogganer swooshing down a snowy hill. "Let 'em. But how about you not thinking that way, huh?"

"If you hadn't ruined a hundred hours of work, it might be different."

"But the dust storm hit too fast! I jettisoned everything, not just your holos. I'm sorry —"

"Lot of good that does. I'm missing some interesting species because of you. This should have been a whole new sweep, not a re-cap."

"I know. Look, if you'll tell me what you want most, I'll take you there right now. Fair enough?"

"It might help." Jaycie was silent for a moment. "You know the forest, the flat trees? Near the ocean, on the far side of the wind channels?"

Matt sighed. "Yes."

"They were almost ready to sporulate. Take me there."

"A thousand clicks from the ship."

"I know that. Get some speed from this thing."

Matt shook his head, climbed to a better cruising altitude, and got some speed from the skimmer.

They crossed the wind-carved eastern badlands, forbidding stretches of red and black rock wind-sculpted into yardangs like rows of overturned rowboats; and then the gray trunks and splashed green needles of the forest came into view. Jaycie's name, flat trees, was apt: they were, literally, trees growing flat on the ground, trunks meters broad but only centimeters thick, needles clustered in bunches. From a distance the trees looked like a primitive painting of a Bonsai forest, but closer in they were enormous. Some, had they grown upright like respectable Terran trees, would have towered five hundred meters or more.

"Air's clear of sand," Matt said. "I'll land near the eastern edge —"

Jaycie began to shout, "Look!" but before she had pronounced the word they had angled into a green cloud: spores, billions of them, boiled in the raging air. Before Matt could react, the skimmer's ramscoops gulped spores, a billowing green mass nearly as thick as weak soup. Sand in the scoops was bad, but spores were a disaster — they burned.

Spores burned where nothing had business burning. The skimmer's sensors, detecting the heat, concluded that the ship was on fire, and, literal-minded devices that they were, reacted perfectly. They jettisoned the command pod.

Jaycie gripped Matt's right arm as they tumbled free of the yawing skimmer. They whirled, and Matt saw the pilotless craft turn nose up, lashed by streamers of green, and flutter away, a leaf in a hurricane.

Matt cursed as he felt a slewing yank. Jaycie cried, "What happened?"

"Drogue ripped. We're bailing out. Now!"

Jaycie scrambled beneath her seat. "I'm taking the film —"

"We're out of the cloud. Hang on!" Matt hit the ejection lever, and both of them were jerked from the canopy. Matt heard the slap of the opening 'chute behind him, saw the ground sweep dizzily away between his dangling feet. He kited, going higher instead of descending. He spilled air, turned, and saw Jaycie below. She clutched a dural container half as big as herself, the extra weight bearing her down. Matt manipulated the shrouds to follow as best he could; it was a long fall.

"I see you," Jaycie's voice buzzed in his earphones. "Stick with me, Matt. I can't steer."

They passed the edge of the flat forest and were over bare rock when Jaycie crunched in for a rough landing. Matt saw her 'chute flap free and away like a frightened jellyfish. He palmed his hand-laser from a thigh pocket and when, a moment later, he thudded down, he cut his 'chute free. He regained balance on the edge of a twenty-meter drop into a wind channel and backed away. "Jaycie?" he said into his mike. The helmet communicators, line-of-sight without the skimmer's booster, were almost useless in this jagged terrain. Matt started back the way he had come, hoping he was headed toward Jaycie. He climbed a few cliffs, grateful for the .71 gravity of Oberon, and finally saw her, with her back against a sheltering boulder and the duralumin case beside her.

"You all right?" he shouted as he bounced over.

"Sprained ankle," Jaycie groaned. And then snarled: "You lost my film again!"

Matt recognized the dural case as a survival kit — first-aid and ration packs, rope, tent. Jaycie, trying for her film, had grabbed the wrong handle. Matt dropped to his knees before her, the wind whipping his planetsuit into miniature waves over his chest and arms. "Let me see the ankle."

Nothing had broken. Matt dug an inflatable bandage from the first-aid kit, applied it, and settled back. "You won't be able to walk far."

"Call and have Steeves or Einarsson come pick us up —"

"Can't. Our helmet communicators won't reach that far."

"What are you saying?"

Matt shrugged. "Until they miss us and send out search craft, we're stuck. And the searchers will probably follow the distress beacon of the skimmer or command pod — *if* they can transmit after the damn things crash. No telling where the pod or the skimmer wound up."

Jaycie leaned against the red sandstone and looked at him through her goggles. "You mean we die here?"

"Not just like that. They *will* look for us —"

"They'll have only thirty hours to do it, and a continent the size of Australia to do it in. You know procedure, and you know Hesseltine. We're dead."

"Not yet. The skimmers should be able to pick up our communicator transmissions if they get within thirty clicks. If we climb to high ground, we can increase the range. It's a long shot, sure, but we're a very big needle in a relatively small haystack."

Jaycie pushed herself up, wincing. "Let's find the high ground."

Matt hefted the tent pack, strapped it on, and gave his right arm to Jaycie. She paused to strap on a first-aid and ration pack. Then they walked downwind. The sun sank low behind them, moving to the tempo of Oberon's twenty-nine hour day. Matt stopped to shift his pack to a more comfortable position.

"Throw it away," Jaycie advised.

"No. We may need it."

Nightfall found them huddled at the base of an enormous tilted table of rock, a prow lifted high into the prevailing winds, with scant shelter from the eddies hissing down its slope. The aluminized tent would be snatched away in the whirling gusts, so they slept in the open, behind a low rampart of loose stone that Matt piled up. But even that gave little protection from the jabbing fingers of gibbering wind-ghosts.

Matt lay wakeful, watching the passage of two moons, one a waxing crescent, a red and bloated thing twice the size of Earth's Luna, the other and later one a cold blue disk smaller than the pupil of Jaycie's eye. Somewhere beyond them was Sol, so distant that its light could not reach this far. He idly wondered if Jaycie, too, wished she could wake to an Earth sunrise just once more. . . .

Matt fell into consciousness as one falls from a tree. The air was full of pink balloons, a birthday-party sky —

"Flying rats," said Jaycie, grinning beside him. "Ballooners. They've been drifting by since daybreak. A migration; I should've guessed. It's the right season, just past the spring equinox."

Matt checked the time. "Hesseltine will be trying to raise us," he said. "She'll probably send skimmers out in a couple of hours. Let's eat, then I'll climb up and start broadcasting."

"Wind's died down. Let's get out of these helmets."

Matt agreed. The morning was not much worse than a very blustery March day on Earth, and he and Jaycie shared survival rations without having to spit out more than a couple of mouthfuls each because of blown grit. The ballooners floated by in groups of four or five, whirling westward. Occasionally, one came in for a bellyflop landing, twitched its whiskers, and with a flick of its tail was off again. Matt smiled despite himself.

Matt had replaced his helmet and had begun to climb when Jaycie stopped him: "Look. There's an injured one."

Matt followed her pointing finger. He saw a scrambling, squeaking, six-legged pink rat, its broken tail dragging. It humped over the rocks in a blind hurry. "It's running from something," Matt said. "I wonder —"

But then he saw what it ran from: a flat creeping thing, more than a meter long, mottled brown, segmented, something like a huge centipede except for the nightmarish head. That, carapaced, armed with wicked pincers, was something like a skull-sized crab. The centipede-thing scuttled, coiled, lashed, and grabbed its prey. Even through the helmet Matt heard the shrill screams of the balloonier. The hunter probed with a mouth-spear, a spray of blood puffed from the victim's nostrils, and the prey went limp, shriveling in on itself. The carnivore sucked, and in moments its pincers held only a furry pouch of pink skin. It shook its head, and the wind took away the scrap.

"Matt!"

He turned, and seeing what Jaycie saw, knew why the ballooniers had fled. More of the carnivores, thousands of them, had poured in a living carpet around the shoulder of the rock platform. They were only meters away. Matt sprinted toward Jaycie. "Come on!"

"I can't run fast enough. Go on!"

But he half-lifted her, grabbed the tent kit, and dragged her away. Some of the nearer creatures scrambled toward them. "Matt! More of them!"

They were surrounded. The creatures had swept around the rock from both sides. Weighted with Jaycie, Matt could not outrun them. He turned and started to climb the tilted table of rock. "I can do this," Jaycie gasped. "On all fours if I have to!"

Matt let her down. Together they toiled into the wind, toward the high, projecting edge of the rock. Behind, the centipedes closed ranks. Matt boosted and butted Jaycie until they were as high as they could get, a hundred meters above their campsite. Matt looked over the edge and saw a sheer drop of a hundred and twenty meters — and more of the centipedes, thick on the ground, as far as he could see.

"They can't get up," he told Jaycie. "This side's too steep."

"This one's not," she said, pointing down the slope. "Look."

Four of the creatures were within twenty meters, their ugly thrashing heads and cocked pincers clearly visible. "I'm going to try to kill them," Matt said.

He found a scattering of broken rock, flat disks larger than his hand. He threw one of these at the nearest carnivore. The rock hit wide, shattered, and did not slow the creature's humping progress. A second, hurled more accurately, split the thing's head. Its body writhed until the following creature bit into it, liquefied it, and left only a withered, wet sac of skin on the stone. And beyond, more of the creatures started to climb.

For two hours Jaycie and Matt kept them back, throwing rocks, skimming stone fragments to dislodge the hold of their jointed legs, leaving the creatures to flounder in the gusts of wind, even using three charges of their pistols to dispatch two that had come uncomfortably close. The wind swelled in force and fury.

"Skimmers will be looking for us now," Matt panted.

"They'll be too late if they don't get here soon. Look."

The main body of the carnivore army boiled thick and brown below, and a wave had started up the slope. They were far too many to turn back with rocks — and between the two of them, Matt and Jaycie had only seventeen charges left in their pistols.

But the wind was an unexpected ally. Rising as the sun rose, it held the predators back. They had to move slowly, probing for holds. Even so, they would be at the top of the slope in less than an hour. Matt thought of the pincers, of the jabbing radula, and the digestive enzymes dissolving living flesh —

He handed his pistol to Jaycie. "Keep 'em back. I've got an idea."

She slid a few meters downslope and immediately shot one of the centipedes. It bucked and jerked, its head a blackened stump. Matt broke open the tent kit. The tough, metalized fabric whipped in the wind; he sat on it to hold it down. He used his laser to cut lengths of line. Below him, Jaycie cried, "What are you doing?"

"Making a kite! Give me your helmet, and keep them back!"

Jaycie snatched off three shots, killing another predator, and shook free of her helmet. She tossed it to Matt. Behind the scant shelter of the rock prow, Matt lashed the dural struts together, then stretched the fabric over the frame, cutting and sealing with his hand-laser. Jaycie, looking over her shoulder as the kite took shape, yelled, "Use my backpack as a drag!"

Matt's gaze was uncomprehending.

"A drag!" she screamed louder, over the howl of the wind. "Tie it to the end of the line!"

He knotted the pack into place and lashed Jaycie's helmet to the kite frame. Jaycie retreated toward him, firing into the rising wave of carnivores. "Too many of them."

"Ready." The box kite was taller than Matt. He gave it to the wind, and felt Jaycie's hand at his waist. She had looped the line into his belt and had tied it off; then she did the same for herself.

The silver kite climbed, tugging harder as it caught the stronger wind aloft; it began to drag Matt forward. "It'll pull us into them," he grunted.

Jaycie yanked the rope from his hands. "Give it all the line!"

The suddenly tautened line at his waist jerked him off his feet. He gasped; he and Jaycie were airborne, feet dangling three meters above the mass of carnivores. But the pack, the drag, had bounced up, too; and the kite, deprived of resistance, had begun to sink.

"We're going in," Matt shouted, feeling the line slacken, seeing the waiting pincers only a meter and a half away. The pack hit first, and the creatures attacked it, locking their jaws in the fabric, tugging it ravenously —

And the line tightened, the kite pulled hard; Jaycie and Matt soared.

"They're flying the kite!" Jaycie laughed. "Their weight is enough to counter the lift!"

It was true. The creatures, trapped by their own appetites, dragged along the rock. Some were crushed, but others locked on to the pack or to their bodies, blind and tenacious. In ten minutes Matt and Jaycie had left the migration of carnivores behind. The backpack bounced, dragged, skidded, found occasional lodgement only to break free, and the dead bodies of a dozen or so centipedes trailed with it, ballasting their escape. They had been airborne for nearly half an hour when Steeves' voice broke in over Matt's helmet communicator: "Where the Hell are you, and how are you moving so fast?"

Matt yelped with joy, then vectored Steeves in. The skimmer came from the north, circled and then paced them. "How do we get down?" Jaycie cried.

But landing proved no problem. The torn pack finally snapped loose, the kite dived, and suddenly *they* were the drag, until Matt used his laser to cut the line free. He and Jaycie, shaken, bruised, and scraped — but grinning like idiots — managed to walk to Steeves' skimmer when it landed.

Later, when Jaycie's ankle had been properly seen to, when Hesseltine had turned over to her the film pack from the control pod — the pod had crashed, but its beacon had survived and Steeves had found it earlier that day — Jaycie told the captain of Matt's bravery and ingenuity.

Matt listened with appropriate aw-shucks humility to Jaycie's glowing words of praise.

His desperate idea had merely been to lift Jaycie's helmet radio high enough to be heard by any nearby skimmer pilot. The last thing in his head was that wild, wind-borne flight over and away from the carnivores. He wouldn't have anticipated that in a hundred years.

But, you understand, he'll never tell Jaycie that.



LONELY ROADS

by Juleen Brantingham
art: Jack Gaughan



The author and her husband Bob have lately moved from New York to the balmy clime of Louisiana. They have three grown offspring — a son and two daughters.

She has sold several dozen short stories and has recently found herself working on a novel.

The flow is not unidirectional.

That is the first lesson but of course those who can understand do not need that one. We would not be here if we did.

The second lesson is a discussion of morality: Do we have the right to do what we do to the lives of others? No satisfactory conclusion is reached. Perhaps they hope that by introducing the question at the beginning — of course things still have beginnings and ends — we will be inoculated against burnout. You wonder why the teachers cannot look into the “future” and see which of the applicants will finally turn away in repugnance from the practice of the Art? You question my vocabulary?

The third lesson delves into the problems of vocabulary and of our limited perceptions. Yes, we have limits, blind spots. But by the third lesson we have gone beyond your ability to comprehend, you who see time as a one-way flow. What arrogance, you think, and you are right.

We are the life-shapers.

It would come over her suddenly, at odd moments. Annette would be thinking of something else or thinking nothing at all, feeling good, and it would come over her like a wave, blotting out everything.

A few miles back, passing through a small Pennsylvania town, she had been stopped at a school crossing. The car idled like a contented cat and so did her thoughts — velvety green lawns, neat walks, flower beds bright with color, a pleasant place in which to spend a lifetime. Even the crossing guard's suspicious gaze did not put her off. A mob of children passed before the car's front bumper.

Annette had smiled at them, remembering so clearly that it was as if she skipped along beside them. The school year was ending in warmth and sunshine. A tall girl with frizzy hair bumped a third-grade arithmetic book out of a boy's arms and someone else giggled. Sneaker-clad feet made happy pattering sounds. Dragging along behind — maybe the threat of an unsatisfactory final report card made him slow today — tail-end Charlie carried what was obviously a gift for the teacher. Bribery, Annette thought, and her smile became warmer.

Then, rising up cold, gray, and shocking, the fear — No, not even that. More formless than fear, laced with rage, a feeling of betrayal, loss, pressure — pressure to escape, to —

She twisted once in her seat, trying to shake it off as if it were an animal clinging to her hair, digging claws into her brain. When it passed she slumped wearily against the wheel, defeated, knowing it would return and helpless to stop it or even to understand it. A thing so wrong that putting it into words could not describe it but only make it seem less than it was. And yet she could not remember.

Outside the car windows the world had dimmed, become gray and unpleasant as if smudged with ash. She rested her head on the steering

wheel.

"It's a bore, isn't it? Being delayed like this when you're anxious to be on your way."

She looked up, startled to see a gray-haired woman in a black coat — a coat? on this warm almost-summer day? — smiling at her from the crosswalk, a few steps from her open window. The children had reached the opposite curb and were pattering and giggling down the last half-block to a red brick building. The crossing guard ignored the woman in the black coat and kept a wary eye on the green car with out-of-state plates.

Annette blinked. She couldn't remember having noticed the woman standing at the side of the road with the children. But she must have been. Moving more slowly than they because of her advanced years — but then Annette noticed that the lifeless gray hair was deceptive because the face beneath it was unlined, the eyes as bright and wondering as a baby's.

Too wrapped up in my own troubles to see what I'm looking at, she thought. Maybe I shouldn't be driving.

The crossing guard was gesturing impatiently now but no one was waiting behind Annette's car and the woman was still in the crosswalk.

"My dear, if you take a left turn here the road will take you straight out, north of town. That is — you are just passing through, aren't you? Not visiting in town?"

"Oh, no. I'm — on vacation." Annette frowned. After her hesitation the words had come suddenly, as if discovered in a foreign-language phrase book. But were they the right ones? On vacation? Strange sounds.

The woman beamed. "Oh, then you certainly want to take the north road. Lovely scenery and not so much traffic that it will make you feel rushed. I hate to feel rushed when I'm on vacation, don't you?"

"Yes. Thank you," Annette said, pleased by the stranger's unexpected friendliness.

She had made the turn, taken the north road, and found that the woman had told the truth. The scenery was beautiful and there were few other cars on the road but even so she felt pushed, pressured. There was something she couldn't leave behind no matter how fast she drove.

This time it was a bumper sticker on the battered dusty-black car ahead of her. SAVE THE WHALES! it begged her. SAVE THE — something — something wasn't right. Gray mist came up and turned the letters into black fire, burning the inside of her head. She knew so little about herself; was she a whale-saving sort of person?

The mist receded finally and she decided to pass the car with the bumper sticker. That was a major event for someone with a driver's license only a week old but she barely gave it a thought. Her hands were wet on the wheel and inside she felt a quiver of something held too tight for too long and suddenly released. All she could think of was the need to get that sticker out of her sight. She was afraid of the gray mist and her own anger.

As she came up beside the other driver she noticed that he was a pleasant-faced man a few years older than herself. There were scraps of paper and envelopes on his dashboard, soft-drink cups tossed on the back seat. He looked like a worrier, a responsible man, probably on his way to the office after saying goodbye to the wife and kids.

These thoughts passed through Annette's mind in an instant, then were replaced by irritation. There should be a place like that for her, too, but where was it? She felt out of step with the world.

Just then she noticed a truck in the left lane. It was moving a little too fast but there was enough time to speed up and get around the black car or to put on her brakes and drop safely behind it. But her see-sawing emotions distracted her. She panicked, forgot the things her driving instructor had taught. She tried to cut in too soon. Her speed was so nearly matched to that of the other car that there was only a slight jar as its front bumper kissed her car's right rear fender. She jumped on the brake pedal with both feet but that too was a mistake. Somehow the two cars locked, embraced, and skidded down the road straight into the path of the speeding truck.

She was looking over her shoulder at the moment of impact.

Neil had been daydreaming since he dropped off the hitchhiker back in town so he didn't notice the green car until it was passing him. He was usually a careful man, giving his attention fully to whatever he was doing, and there was no time in his life to be wasted in fantasy. When the woman started to pass he glanced at her, feeling warmth rise to his face as if she had caught him in a shameful act. But her profile acknowledged nothing. It was cool, remote.

He could tell from a glimpse of blonde hair and cheekbones that she was one of those women, the kind who always made him feel grubby and awkward. Not, he had to admit, through any intent of their own. Most of the time that kind of woman never even noticed him.

A truck was approaching from the opposite direction. Neil touched the brake to give the woman extra room to pull back into the lane. She did so smoothly, competently; and by the time the truck thundered by Neil's old clunker, the green car was several lengths ahead and still increasing the distance between them.

The story of my life, he thought, and wondered what he meant, where the thought had come from.

He would be glad to see the last of that car, not to have to think about its driver. He felt haunted. It was the hitchhiker's fault. Neil never stopped for hitchhikers; he was usually in too much of a hurry because he had appointments to keep. But today he hadn't had that excuse and it was odd to see an elderly woman at the side of the road with her thumb out. Feeling chivalrous, he had stopped.

Of course there had been a price to pay; the woman had chattered and

questioned until he'd thought his head would burst. In self-defense he'd started to talk. He'd meant only to fill up the space between them with empty words but her bright, friendly expression had urged him on. Once he opened his mouth it was as if someone had told him not to mention polar bears: he hadn't been able to think of anything *but* polar bears — in this case, the cool blonde women who haunted him.

He couldn't remember why the old woman had said she was hitchhiking. He felt uncomfortable, out of synch with the world. As if there was something he'd left undone and he wouldn't be able to get back on track until he'd retraced his steps and repaired the omission.

That, he thought, is the reason for this — he had to grope for the word — vacation.

People said many good things about him. He could vaguely remember having overheard conversations, seeing admiration and respect in their eyes. But he felt he was a poorly prepared actor, repeating lines by rote in a language he didn't know. If the others knew what a chaotic mess his life was, how he could never quite get a grip on things, they would despise him as he sometimes despised himself. He was the kid whose cuffs didn't meet his socks, the kid whose fly was open when he finally found the courage to ask the homecoming queen for a dance.

But those women. Not always blonde, not always tall but all members of the same sorority. Born with knowledge he could never acquire.

Why were they so much on his mind today? Were they somehow connected with the thing he had left undone?

He shook his head, irritated with himself for having these thoughts. He was himself; he'd made his life the way it was and, like it or not, he was stuck with it. He was too old to change. Nothing would ever change. He reached out to take another cigarette from the pack on the dash, punched the lighter with his knuckle. Cigarettes were another bad idea; he should never have allowed himself to get the habit. Too late to do anything about it now. If he needed proof of that all he had to do was remember the crushing pain in his chest — yesterday? Had it been yesterday? What was wrong with his memory lately? Brain damage?

Nothing was going to change . . .

The hitchhiker was no longer in the car but he could feel her looking at him, questioning, encouraging.

"The Hell it's not!"

He spoke out loud — shouted, really — and tossed the cigarette out the window. He threw the pack after it and, for good measure, pulled the lighter from its hole in the dashboard and threw that, too. "Damn it, nothing will change unless I change it. Starting now." Why had he thought he could change the world but not himself? He felt virtuous, strong. He also felt an undercurrent of amusement: it was only one cigarette so far, hardly enough to test his strength.

That woman, the kind who turned him stutter-tongued. Probably had blue eyes. Probably had a husband. Well, what could she do? Shoot him? Have him arrested? Tell her big muscular husband — probably sleeping in the back seat — to beat the shit out of him?

Well, yes, but besides that?

He stepped on the gas pedal and a few minutes later, going over a rise in the road, was rewarded by the sight of the green car. He tapped his horn, pulled to the left, and tapped his horn again. She looked over at him, her eyes widening with surprise. They were blue. He felt his pants shortening, his fly unzipping itself.

Nothing will change. . . .

He twisted his lips into something he hoped resembled a smile, raised one hand as if he were drinking something and pointed up the road. Of course it wouldn't work. It had been a stupid idea. No self-respecting woman would —

Just then he heard an explosion as one of his worn tires blew out. The steering wheel twisted in his hands and his car veered into the green one, carrying it along as it plowed into a huge tree at the side of the road.

He couldn't take his eyes from her. At the moment of impact he was losing himself in the depths of shocked blue eyes.

This part of the thing has been reworked so many times that it becomes risky. The fabric can be repaired only so often before holes develop and things slip back on themselves. I object to the black the Artist has me wear, the personality I must project. I think they will begin to notice me as their lives are shaped to new ends. My objections are ignored. I am an apprentice and must do as I have been directed.

But with every advance the Artist becomes shorter-tempered, harder to work with. You would not think this would be so; things go according to his plan.

The man's signal seemed clear enough but Annette was nervous. What if she'd misunderstood? What if he was only trying to tell her that one of her tires was going flat or something? She couldn't see how raising his hand to his mouth that way could have anything to do with her car but with the state of her nerves, anything was possible. When she nodded — what was she doing? — he'd looked pleased. Surely he wouldn't have been pleased merely because she seemed to understand some message about a mechanical problem. He had pulled ahead of her, motioning for her to follow.

What was she doing? She must be out of her mind.

Mile after mile flowed beneath the wheels with nothing but empty fields to be seen at the sides of the road. Her heart was pounding. For a moment — only a moment this time — the gray wave threatened to engulf her again. But anticipation forced it down.

She should not have agreed to this. When he found a place she should just

keep going. If he followed her, tried to change her mind, she should find a police station or patrolling sheriff's car. She should. What would her parents think of a pick-up like this? Her friends?

She took one hand off the wheel and rubbed her temples. There was something wrong — She was confused. Of course she had parents and friends but at that moment she could not recall faces or names. Wasn't that silly? She must be very tired. The confusion passed; it couldn't possibly have been important.

Brake lights flashed; a turn signal blinked. Annette slowed her car, scolding herself for inattention, for they were approaching the edge of a small town. There was a restaurant ahead on the right, a small one that looked like a railroad car sheathed in fieldstone. There were three cars in the black-topped parking lot and a couple of bikes nosed into a rack at the side. The black car pulled into a slot to the left and — telling herself again that she really should not be doing this — Annette parked beside it.

For a moment she sat there trying to hold panic at bay, listening to the engine tick as it cooled. Almost-summer had become summer and heat haze rose from the blacktopping. Distantly she could hear children shouting and a blue jay scolded them but the sounds were muffled as if by a blanket. She fumbled for the door handle; she wasn't sure she could trust her knees to hold her up. The only thing that kept her from starting the car and driving away was the certain knowledge that she would despise herself if she did. It seemed like months, years since she'd talked to anyone, really talked. What could happen to her in a public place like this? She could see a waitress at one of the windows, a group of women going up the steps to the door.

She got out of the car, closed the door carefully. Only then did she dare to let her eyes meet his and when she did, the trapped, panicky feeling suddenly grew worse. He had a pleasant face, saved from handsomeness by unruly hair and ears that stuck out just a little. He looked calm, completely sure of himself while she, on the other hand, felt naked without the protection of steel and distance. As she made her way around the car she hoped there would be nothing in her path to trip her because she couldn't feel anything from the knees down.

He held out his hand. "Hello, my name is Neil Benson."

Her throat dried up, just totally dried up and she knew she'd never be able to get a word out. They would have to stand here forever, locked together by embarrassment and awkwardness.

Light flashed as the opening restaurant door caught sunlight and threw it into her eyes. She blinked away sudden tears, noting, in a distant part of her mind, the tail of a black coat just flicking aside in time to avoid being caught. Then her purse slipped out of her hand and as if released from a spell, both of them leaned over to pick it up. They bumped heads, laughed about it, and her embarrassment was gone. It seemed perfectly natural to take his arm as they walked up the steps.

Afterward she couldn't remember exactly what they had said to each other over coffee but it was like talking to someone she had known all her life. She knew he was in some kind of government service; he seemed to know, too, what she did for a living, where she lived; questions were boring and unnecessary. They watched the others in the restaurant, speculated about them in whispers, laughed at the young man with rainbow-striped hair and no shirt who came in and was indignantly refused service.

Later she paused, her fingers resting on the hood of the car, noting absently how it burned. She hated for this to end. He looked over at her, the same reluctance showing in his face. "Listen," he said suddenly, "are you going any place in particular? Meeting someone?"

She shook her head.

"I know a good restaurant just over the line in Ohio. We could meet and have dinner."

She tried to calm down before she started her car, tried not to think about this attraction they had for each other, the ease she felt with him. Why did the air feel so soft, the colors look so bright? But once again doubt clenched her stomach. Maybe he didn't feel the same way. She thought she did not know very much about men. She tried to remember if she had ever felt so close to someone before.

As she pulled out of the parking lot close behind him, his car sputtered and died. She was still distracted by her feelings and noticed too late. The accident was no more than a fender bender, or would have been if not for the van full of teenagers that flew over a rise and arrowed down on them before Neil or Annette could think of taking some kind of evasive action. To the people inside the restaurant the noise of the collision sounded like the end of the world.

While the others rushed to the windows, one woman frowned with irritation and reached for her coat.

He tells me nothing. It is a privilege to work with him of course but so frustrating to be no more than a tool, to be as blind as those with whom we work. Perhaps it is a lesson, to teach me humility. But it is he who needs that lesson more than I.

His voice drones endlessly, stating the obvious, but that is not what I need to know.

"It is technology that makes it work but technology is only the skin of the thing. Passion is the bone and muscle and brain and nerve tissue."

"When did you know?" Annette asked a night and a day later. "When was the very first minute?"

He laughed. "When you dropped your handbag. When we bumped heads."

"Me, too," she said, curling closer to him on a motel bed that dipped in

the middle and smelled of mildew. They were in Indiana.

A drunk on the wrong side of the road. A blind curve.

Later she said, "I've always been alone before," and knew it was a confession, not self-pity.

He seemed to know, too. "Both of us," he said. "We had to wait until the time was right. Until we were ready."

Spring slipped away under their wheels. Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin. They finally realized how ridiculous it was to keep two cars when they knew they would never again allow anything to separate them. SAVE THE WHALES! was left behind in a used car lot in Minnesota.

A train crossing. A brake failure. A skid on a wet curve. South Dakota, Wyoming, Idaho.

"Is there someone you should call? Arrangements you should make?" she asked, thinking of the work he sometimes alluded to.

He looked thoughtful, almost worried for a moment, then shook his head. "I can't think of anyone."

The fear or panic — or memory? — no longer troubled her. She wondered sometimes, with a feeling that was not entirely apprehension, what it was they were running from, or to. For now they enjoyed summer days, the kind they had known as children but knew so much better now, with each other.

They were married in a small town in Oregon. Their witnesses were a couple they had met in a restaurant, an elderly woman and her grandson. Neil and Annette tried to remember not to stare at the grandson's hair, frizzy and rainbow-striped, though they laughed about it later. The woman gave Annette her only wedding present, a lace handkerchief that smelled of lavender.

She was pregnant; Neil began to worry, frowning at her when he thought she did not see, falling silent in the middle of a conversation, then picking it up later as if the silence had not happened. She knew him well enough not to push for an answer before he was ready. In Arizona he told her about the pains in his chest. "You may have to raise this child alone."

She put her hands on his face, forcing him to look at her, to see in her eyes the knowledge she had been given. "You're not going to leave me. Not ever."

Amid the scream of locked brakes, the crash of shattering glass, the grinding screech of metal, in rain and moonlight and sunshine, in seconds of stark terror, they died.

I have practiced the exercise until I think I am very good at it: bringing myself to that particular very sharp point and

... holding back ...

... holding back ...

... holding back until it bursts, it roars and tumbles and screams and sweeps away ... sweeps away like an unleashable tide.

Even those we shape can dimly grasp the power of passion: the things they understand without having learned, the things they sense not by senses, the powers that come upon them swiftly and leave just as swiftly.

And yet I do not understand the Artist, what he hopes to accomplish with this work, why his powers grow even now. Now. . .

On a day in early spring outside a small southern town with a forgettable name, there was a traffic snarl made up of wreckers and ambulances and state patrol cars. The red, blue, and amber flashing lights competed strangely with the sunlight. Other traffic had been detoured through an adjacent field because a jackknifed truck and the remains of a green car blocked the road from side to side. Someone on the scene remarked that if they had to have an accident this was the best place to have it with a hospital just up the hill. Then he shuddered and turned away. The truck driver was being carried to an ambulance but the driver and passenger of the green car would never again need a hospital or anything else. And that young man, probably trying to hitch a ride, caught so freakishly under the wheels.

Some time after the wreckage had been cleared away, up the hill, there was an argument in progress on the third floor. It raged up and down the hall between the doctor's lounge and the administration office, between the administration office and the nursing station. Mary Roberts was sick of the whole thing. Let the others figure out where to place the blame. She was a nurse and the one thing she knew for sure was that there was another life in her charge. For the moment, nothing else mattered.

She tested the temperature of the formula, then reached for the infant in the last basket under the window. He was squalling, not just crying but squalling, putting everything he had into that furious little scream. Mary had been afraid he might hurt himself before the others could see what had to be done. His limbs jerked from the force of his anger and his face was nearly purple.

"Here now. Here, don't pull away. Just try this."

Blessed peace fell over the nursery as the baby began to suck at the nipple. He fed with the same intensity as he had screamed, as if he'd been born for just this one act. Mary touched his cheek and the pale fuzz on his head with a soothing hand. She had cared for hundreds of babies, knew better what they needed than the doctors did. But this pathetic tyke —

Outside the big window a doctor was shouting — shouting, in a hospital! — it came from? Other hospitals lose — did you manage to find one — doesn't belong to anyone?"

The baby jerked in her arms. Didn't that fool know how sensitive babies were to the emotions of those around them? She shook her head at the fuss. Someone had reported seeing an old woman in a black coat slipping down the fire stairs a while ago. Mary was certain that when they sorted this out

they would find that woman had something to do with it. And as for that nurse's aide who claimed the baby had just suddenly appeared in an empty basket — well, Mary would be checking her breath the next time she saw her.

This poor tyke was not like any other infant she'd ever cared for. He seemed to have been born angry, as if. . . .

As if they had lived for just this one thing: to create a child. And now he has no more use for them and they are at rest in the final peace that should have come to them before they had ever met.

It is his own life he has been shaping. I knew when I saw the scraps of blood-drenched rainbow under the wheels, took the child into my arms. I understand his power now. Beginnings and endings. A perfect circle. The concept, the perfection take my breath away and yet —

I cannot decide if this is the highest form of Art or the highest form of selfishness.



OPEN-ENDED UNIVERSE

Messier's clouds escape
Into the reaches
Of the growing sky,
Hermits scrambling into darkness.

Neighbors huddle together.
Andromeda's Nebula,
Magellan's Clouds
Turn to the Milky Way.
Stars spin closer round the cores
And follow one another inward
Into nothing
Galaxies folded in a point
Of no dimensions
In the growing sky.

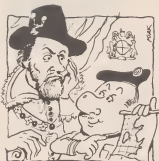
Ages beyond the age of stars
Even singularities evaporate,
Vanish into energy, which disperses
In the growing sky.

— Ruth Berman

THROUGH TIME & SPACE WITH FERDINAND FEGHOOT η by Grendel Briarton art: Tim Kirk

*Of royal and/or imperial
personages across space and time,
nearly a score — among them three
other English monarchs — are
known to have rubbed shoulders
with the redoubtable traveler.*

*Not that he is any name-dropper:
after all he has been
several of them.*




Ferdinand Feghoot was an intimate friend of Ben Jonson's and spent many a merry evening in the great playwright's company, usually at the Court of James I. It was on one such occasion that the King had — albeit grudgingly — to award him a baronetcy.

The King had been marvelling at the profundity of John Donne, then Dean of St. Paul's, to whose homilies he frequently listened. "No philosopher can hold a candle to him!" he averred. "Nay, not even the great Grecians — not even Aristotle! Even he couldn't express such vast truths in such very few words. Why, just last Sunday, John Donne uttered one I shall never forget. He said, '*No man is an island.*' Who can fault so noble a statement?"

"Your Majesty," replied Feghoot, "it's all right as far as it goes, but it's not wholly accurate."

"Ridiculous!" cried the King. "Fferdinande ffeghoote, I'll make you a wager. Prove what you say, and you'll be a baronet. Fail, and you'll serve as my headsman for the space of three months."

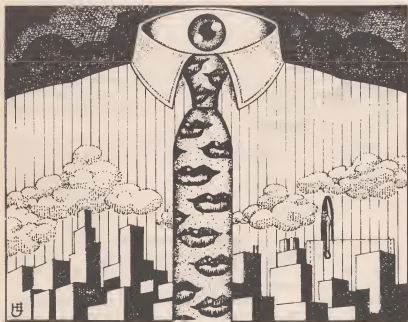
"Ha!" laughed Ben Jonson. "That'll teach you the value of accuracy!"

"I accept your terms, Sire," Feghoot sank to one knee in front of the King. " '*No man is an island?*' Dr. Donne did make an error. He forgot the one those fine tailless cats come from." 

STREET TALK

J. B. Allen

art: Hank Jankus



The author tells us that this story comes from the time Boston MA decided to eat him alive. Not with a bevy of nineteen-year-old lingerie models as his fantasy would have it, but with a carnivorous subway.

We are glad he has returned to tell the tale and is not to this day riding 'neath the streets of Boston — or has not vanished into another dimension via infinite connectivity.

"Atlanta's going to kill us," said the man on the next barstool. I thought for a second.

"Chicago. That's right, we play Chicago tomorrow," I corrected.

The stranger turned toward me, buttoning a tattered sportcoat. His bloodshot eyes scanned me up and down. "Chicago wants us to live," he intoned gravely.

I looked across the bar. Aquinas was on duty tonight, listening from a safe distance as he pretended to polish a glass.

I gave an insipid laugh and started to edge off my seat. The man looked me over like he was preparing a human sacrifice. He wasn't old, but he obviously hadn't eaten or slept for days. His face looked like the underside of a carpet.

"I don't care if you know," he said, turning back to his beer. "Probably better off if you don't."

I was ready to find another spot to wait for Regulars' Night at McGuffins when Aquinas caught my eye. He glanced at the stranger and then back at me with just a hint of a nod. I was hooked.

Aquinas has two gifts: a surgeon's skill with gin and tonic and a nose for outrageous and interesting stories. I had some time to kill before the others got in, so I resumed my seat.

You can't spend a night at McGuffins without having to have your hat stretched. The walls were a mad array of things people had brought in, things that caught the sense of the crazy stories they told. Alfred Hitchcock called the object of a story a McGuffin, which is why it's called McGuffins No Apostrophe. It's a collection of, well, McGuffins.

Even I had made my humble contribution, leaving behind such treasures as a cement Hula-Hoop from a certain night in El Segundo. The place is a testimony, either to how strange the world is, or how well some people lie.

I waited for the man to start again. He sipped and stared into the mirror above the bar, counting on his fingers. After a while I got up the courage to say something.

"Okay, so it's not baseball. What kind of game? Hockey, soccer?"

He swivelled toward me and glared. "It isn't a game. No game, got that?"

"Yeah, sure, I just thought you said, you know, Atlanta was going to kill us. I thought it was sports."

He laughed ironically. "That's all part of it. No, I mean that Atlanta, Georgia, is going to kill Los Angeles, California."

"I always heard the South would rise again. An invasion."

"You idiot. Did I say 'a bunch of people from Atlanta are going to kill a bunch of people in LA'? Or did I say 'Atlanta is going to kill us'?"

I flagged down Aquinas with the hope of getting a peace treaty.

"A draft for my friend and the usual for me."

The stranger seemed to relax a little and managed a harried smile.

"Something to eat?" I asked. He shook his head.

"I'd rather be massacred on an empty stomach, thanks."

"Mister, could you tell me precisely what the Hell you're talking about? First, Atlanta is going to destroy L.A. Then it isn't, then it is again." I stopped, realizing that I was pushing someone who looked like he'd already reached his limit. It was time to try a little humor. "Besides, I'm not worried if we have Chicago on our side."

"Chicago had to agree not to interfere."

I shook my head. McGuffins is paradise for people with incredible stories, but most of the time they made at least a little sense. I was beginning to suspect Aquinas of a streak of sadism. Still, some hairs on the back of my neck stood up from the way he made the cities sound, well, alive.

"Start at the beginning," I said with a mental sigh.

The man licked an island of foam from his lip.

"I was with NASA. Computers and Artificial Intelligence were my specialty. I was working on a project for mapping from space. I was happily married with two kids and my little sliver of the American dream."

I took a closer look. Sure enough, except for wear and dirt, his clothes were rather expensive. His hands were smooth, and his stubble looked hard and curly. Not a textbook wino.

"Our first project was re-mapping North America," he said. "We sent up cameras on the space shuttle and started mapping a close detailed survey of cities. Each time we would zoom in a level, we would see new levels of patterns, cities become districts, which turn into zones that give way to developments, etc.

"The problem was that our cameras limited how much we could look at at any given time. Just about the time we started to see a bunch of patterns together, we were too far zoomed in to see what they were doing.

"So I was assigned what we call SuperAp, a super-aperture camera with multi-microprocessor image enhancers that —"

"Wait. Pretend you're explaining it to an aborigine," I said, a little embarrassed.

"Sorry. It's basically very simple. It takes a big, super-detailed picture and merges the image patterns into something we can understand. Sort of like having somebody step back from a billboard to tell you what it says."

"Large patterns," I suggested.

"Large, complex ones," he said, nodding as he remembered. "So we sweated and struggled over what turned out to be a computer that pre-analyzed each little bit of information before sending it on to be integrated."

"Sort of like the way the eye works."

"That's where we got the idea," he told me with an approving nod. "We finally finished SuperAp and discovered that there was nothing we could test it on without putting it in orbit. And our insurance company, Continental Mutual, wouldn't let us launch without some tests."

I winced at the mention of my employer. They were still nervous after the

misplacement of some TDRS communications satellites.

The awkward silence was broken by the arrival of our drinks. He took a sip.

"I was crushed. There was no way to launch without a test and no way to test without a launch. Where to find a meta-pattern? I became obsessed with finding a solution. Patterns in insect flights, UFO sightings, flu epidemics, all came up with nothing that would satisfy the insurance company. I needed a spectacle, a breakthrough. And I got one."

He laughed and shook his head. "Boy, did I get one. I was in the park one day when a woman walked by in a shirt that declared **I'M WITH STUPID!** That started me thinking. Garments carry all sorts of information about status, sexual availability, and so forth. That made me wonder what shaped the colors of clothes that people wear every day. I wondered if the machine could pick up some kind of a pattern in that."

I mulled that over. Sure enough, St. Patrick's Day notwithstanding, I've often seen colors recur in a day more than you might expect by chance. "Interesting idea."

"I thought so too. So we hooked it into the security cameras at the downtown bus station and waited. Nothing.

"We scanned and searched the data, fudged a little, tried different lenses on the pickup camera, everything, but came up empty. So I started to tear the equipment down when the computer came up with an error."

He had a puzzled expression. "It came back with a message that basically said 'Command text found in data stream.' I checked into it and found that, sure enough, it had picked up a pattern in the clothing color that it mistook for a command. Something I had done during the shutdown had allowed a recurring pattern to be sensed.

"By now, everybody else had been pulled off the project and transferred. I started using my free time and a little money.

"At first the pattern would come and go, but eventually it started to stabilize. It was so complex that I never really figured out how it worked. It seems to have something to do with complementary and tertiary colors. Anyway, I figured that what I had hit upon was a 'wave' of colors that a person might see too much or too little on a particular day. So the next day they compensate by wearing an opposing color, or imitate by wearing the same one. The day after that, another group would respond while the first group picked up a new message."

"I just pick a shirt at random," I pointed out.

"Right. And ducks randomly organize into patterned flight."

"What if I spill something on my shirt and change it?"

"Well, there's going to be some noise in any message, which the system will correct. But usually people that have to change pick a 'silent' color; powder blue or medium gray are favorites."

I felt a chill, remembering the gray pullover that I always reached for

when I needed a quick replacement.

"I could intentionally wear any color!" I insisted.

"Another color from what? Your first shirt? Or was that just a false start prior to picking the right one? After all, you like that one best, and that's what I'm talking about."

This delusion was impossible to beat. But I was getting the old curiosity bug.

"Tell me about the patterns," I urged.

"They're big and slow, with a lot of repetition, I guess because people could show up in just about any order. It seems to be a 'message' at about two hundred and fifty individuals. Which is how I managed to murder my own city."

He drank and took a long sigh.

"Day after day I worked with the machine, combining the patterns into more complex symbol sets. Eventually I began to see what looked like words, which the computer handily combined into a simple language."

I grimaced. "All these people were talking with their shirts? What did they say?"

"Lots of things. And not aware of any of it. I asked some of them why they wore that particular color. The ones that would answer just shrugged and said they just felt like it.

"As to what they were 'saying,' I couldn't tell. All I knew was that I was watching some information travelling from place to place. I needed a code key, a Rosetta stone.

"The answer was orange juice."

That one was way over my head. "Orange juice? Orange was a special color?"

"No, I set up a stand and handed out free orange juice to people wearing a particular color. After a couple of days, I had shifted the pattern to my chosen color. Not everybody, but a really pronounced change.

"Then, without warning, I changed the color and started over. The computer went wild. It was like your wife finding out that you've been using her toothbrush for a month.

"Inside two weeks I had a clear picture of the syntax of the language. From that I built up verbs and nouns. At last, I could listen to what was going on."

I was leaning forward, listening anxiously. "What was it?"

"A lot of 'What did I just say?' and 'Why did I say that?' and so forth. It was very slow going, since each message took a full day. Then it struck, the idea that was to spell doom for us all."

"What was it?"

"Winos."

I decided he must be putting me on. He must have figured my first impression of him and decided to have a little fun. I swirled my gin and

tonic idly. "Winos?"

"Yeah. I went out and bought two hundred and fifty-six shirts, based on a code I had the computer build from a message I wanted to send. It was a copy of the 'What was that?' signal.

"I handed them out with a shot of rye and a bus ticket. All that day I hovered over the computer output, feverish with anticipation. Then it came. The printer came on:

WHAT WAS THAT 'WHAT WAS THAT'?

"I was ecstatic. I moved a cot into the computer room along with a hot plate and a television. During the several months I had been on the project I had thought of nothing else, seldom stopping to eat or sleep. My wife moved in with her minister and NASA wrote me a really nice letter about how my services were no longer required. But I didn't care, I was onto something really big.

"I marshalled my wino brigade and bought bus tokens by the bucketful. We went to town.

I SAID IT.

WHO YOU?

"That was a tough one, since proper nouns didn't translate. I responded by asking the same question.

OH GOOD. THOUGHT WAS GOING CRAZY.

NO I'M HERE.

WHERE?

"Damned proper nouns again.

HERE.

OKAY. WHAT WANT?

TALK YOU.

YOU GOT. SIGN OFF.

"It was driving me crazy. Who was I talking to? What could set up the patterns of colors that carried these messages? I thought that there might be another experimenter doing the same thing, but I had the only computer that could make sense of these patterns. Besides, my winos knew that they had been told to wear particular shirts. No, it was something huge.

"I decided to invent a proper noun, an arbitrary symbol to represent me.

I BOB. WHAT YOU?

NOT BOB.

WHAT ELSE AREN'T YOU?

INTERESTED. SIGN OFF.

"This was the worst impasse of all. Whatever it was, I didn't want to make it angry. So I tried an experiment. I scanned the people getting off the buses from different cities. There were a lot of messages that made no sense, but I started to see something I was searching for. Proper nouns. Buses from Phoenix had a symbol that was repeated over and over. The same was true for Omaha, Detroit, and every major city. Whatever the thing was I was

talking to, it was also talking to other cities. I caused all kinds of havoc by sending a false message to Boston. It cost me a fortune but it was worth it. The stodgy New England city took offense at my advance and sent back a reprimand. In retrospect, I wish I had tried Miami.

"But I was still in the dark as to exactly who, or what, I was talking to. Then Jack Webb helped out.

"You know how *Dragnet* opens? 'This is the city, Los Angeles, California,' as the camera pans across the skyline. And it struck me.

"The buildings are no more the city than the skeleton is the human body. And don't say that the city is the people, because that isn't true, just like you don't look at me as a mobile sack of neurons. No, the city is The City.

"It has a soul, a personality. Think about what you think of San Francisco: don't you have a distinct feeling, just like you do about a particular person? Or New Orleans. Think about it. What is that feeling? Where does it come from?"

I squirmed.

"Information moves around inside the city just like thoughts roam around inside your head; some you're aware of, some not. The patterns occasionally make sense to us, usually not."

"What about uniforms? Businessmen that dress alike and the same way day after day?" I asked.

"Ever had recurring thoughts? A song that you can't get out of your head? Ideas you can't change even if you want to?"

It was insane. Or at least it seemed insane. "What happened next?"

"Well, I tried talking to LA again, but no luck. Days would go by without getting a sensible word."

"Sounds like my wife."

"When it finally keyed back in, the messages were confused, upset. They begged me to 'SIGN OFF.' But I was desperate. I'd sacrificed everything I had to make this thing work. I harassed the poor city until I realized that things were starting to break down. There was gang violence, labor disputes, layoffs, and strikes. The city was going crazy.

"I was getting nervous, and decided to quit. I had the computer help me prepare a farewell message and got ready to round up my troops. Before I could act, a message came in.

THEY'VE DECIDED TO KILL ME.

"I reread the message a dozen times. It couldn't be a joke, even if a city could joke. Evidently the other cities had passed sentence on poor old LA. It was to be executed.

WHO? WHEN?

ATLANTA HAS A CONTRACT ON ME. SOON, VERY SOON.

"I panicked. What could I do? Frantically I tried to think of a plan. The only hope seemed to be to fly the equipment to Atlanta and try to persuade it to let Los Angeles live. In the meantime I tried one last exchange.

WHY?

"I was packing long into the night. The next morning I left to make travel arrangements. When I returned, everything was gone. NASA had reclaimed the equipment, dismantling my accidental miracle in the process.

"The workers had left behind the final printout, sticking out of a huge box of trash. I read it and collapsed.

"I recovered a couple of days ago and wandered the streets, trying to ignore the color of the clothes that I saw. At last, I stumbled in here for a last beer."

McGuffins was silent. Aquinas offered the first free beer I had ever seen him draw. The stranger quaffed it in a single, prolonged drink.

Without a word, he rose and shuffled out the door. Murmurs began to drift from the crowd. I turned back to the bar and signalled for another drink. Then something caught my eye on the polished wood surface. It was a powder-blue shirt and, under it, a scrap of computer printout.

I handed the shirt to Aquinas, who was already looking for a spot on the well-populated wall.

I held the printout in my fingertips, wondering if I actually wanted to know. Finally in a burst of courage, I unfolded it and let out an audible gasp.

I HEAR VOICES FROM NOWHERE. YOUR VOICE.



LORELEI; OR, NOBODY LISTENS ANY MORE

Lovely hair bedraggled
eyes brim full of tears
her beloved Rhine she's leaving,
polluted now for years.

Silken clothes in patches,
golden combs in hock,
she's joining McNamara's band
where she'll be singing rock.

— Morris Liebson

Lorelei 77

THE DAY AFTER

by Jonathan Andrew Sheen

Jon Sheen is by now a veteran reader of science fiction; and he proves herewith that he knows something about SF editors that some people never catch on to. This is his first SF story sale.

The Editor slowly climbed to his feet, shoving aside piles of science-fiction manuscripts. They were dead, all dead. He remembered the mushroom clouds, the poison gases, and wondered how many others might have survived. Not many, he was sure. And he'd never find anyone in his ruined office! He staggered down the stairs, out into the wreckage that had been the City.

"Hello?" he called out.

No answer. This would happen a lot over the next four hours. Finally, in a fallen office building, he heard a muffled answering cry, and dug through the rubble for the better part of another hour before freeing the voice's owner.

It was a woman, beautiful and blonde. Most of her clothing had been torn away, and she clutched the rest around her, to too little effect.

"I thought I was the only one," she said.

"Me, too," confessed the Editor. He shook his head. "What's your name?" he asked suddenly.

A hint of a smile played with her full, sensuous lips.

"Eve," she told him.

So he strangled her. There are some things you just don't say to a science-fiction editor.



THE BROTHERS LAMMIAT
by John Gregory Betancourt
art: George Barr



The author denies (quite vocally) being a child prodigy, for all that he sold his first story (to 100 Great Fantasy Short Stories, ed. by Asimov, Carr, & Greenberg) at age 17. The present tale is one of a loosely linked series, including "Farmington's Eye" (forthcoming in the anthology New Masters, ed. by J. N. Williamson) and The Blind Archer, a novel near completion as we write this.

I: Hilan Lammiat

I jingled the jewels in my beard with one meaty hand. The diamonds and rubies sparkled like the sun at noon, despite the tavern's dimness, and brought a quiet gasp of awe from the scantily clad serving girl behind the counter. I leered at her. The jewels weren't real, of course — not even I, Hilan Lammiat the Pirate, would wear my valuables into a dive like Slab's Tavern.

"So, my pretty," I said, louder than the bedlam of swearing, dicing, fighting, and general mayhem behind me. "Let's slip out back for a bit and —"

"Hey, Hilan!" The greeting was immediately followed by a hearty clap on the back that sent the breath whooshing from my lungs. I am not a small man, nor a patient one. Few people — very few — would've dared to pound me on the back.

I choked, gasped once, then turned with a low growl — to face my brother. "I see you found me after all," I said.

Nollin stood there and grinned back, a taller, more heavily muscled version of myself. We even dressed much alike — gold rings looping ears and nose, crimson and silver scarves around our necks and heads. I wore a plain blue shirt and black silk pants that puffed out between waist and knee; he wore black and silver. Matching curved swords — gifts from our father before the Lord of Zelloque hanged him — dangled jauntily from our belts.

Father hadn't been able to tell us apart, either, so one day he'd given me a dueling wound on my right cheek that had left a jagged white scar. I stroked the scar and wished he'd given it to Nollin instead.

"You look well," Nollin said.

"Would've been better never to see your face again."

"Now, now, Hilan — you must have patience with your kid brother. Blood's thick, eh?"

"Thick enough I haven't killed you. Yet. What do you want?"

He laughed. "Drink up. Then we talk."

Casting a disappointed glance at the serving girl, who fluttered her long dark lashes coyly, I drained my mug, then slammed it down. Then I tossed a copper coin onto the counter, stood, and followed my brother out to the cobbled street.

Midnight had scarcely come and passed. All the dockside taverns still rang with the boisterous sounds of sailors at ease. After two months at sea, I wished I were back inside Slab's place, away from the chilling night air and the monsters that haunted it. Still, it was my brother that had come — best to see what the boy wanted. . . .

The two of us strolled silently past the inns and bars, through puddles of light and shadow cast by dim lamps and open windows, heading toward the long, dark piers stretching into the harbour. Small ships tied to the nearer pilings bobbed like corks on the low waves. Further out, tall, high-prowed, triple-masted sailing ships of the Viandas Mercenaries slowly rolled, proud

banners fluttering against the wash of stars. And there were other ships, too — traders from Pethis and Coran, galleys from Lothaq and Selambique, even a few slavers on the long voyage between Losmuul and Volise. Scattered among the craft were a few unmarked ships belonging to lesser Lords of Zelloque — or privateers like Nollin and me.

Still silent, we passed onto the pier. Drunken sailors lolled on the decks of some ships, snoring, eyes rolled back, mouths open. I shook my head in disgust. Spirits of the night could enter a man's body through his mouth, stealing his heart and draining his blood.

"Whose ship?" I asked.

"Mine," Nollin said. "I have something to show you."

At last the two of us reached the *Serpent*, Nollin's ship, and crossed the rope gangway to its deck. A small, wiry man dressed in white breeches and shirt ran to Nollin while other sailors watched from the shadows, eyes wide and white as marble. Covertly, I studied his ship. The entire crew was present, to all appearances ready to sail at a moment's notice.

"Ship's tight, Captain," one of the mates called.

"Good," Nollin said. "We sail in an hour." He turned to me with a half-mocking gesture of welcome. "After you."

We went aft to the captain's cabin. Behind us, waves lapped at the *Serpent's* sides like the pulse of a human heart.

A single lamp burned overhead. We sat at the chart table and watched each other warily for a moment. Then I gave up being patient and demanded, "Well?"

"We've never trusted each other," Nollin said, "and yet I feel responsible for you. Therefore I pass on this warning: soon — perhaps this very night — Zelloque will be destroyed. The Great Lord will be murdered and a Tyrant will usurp the throne. Leave Zelloque or you will be killed and your ship taken."

I felt my face flush hot and red at the thought, and almost screamed back a challenge for anyone who'd dare to try. *Almost*. I knew my brother well enough to realize he spoke the truth. But how could a Tyrant kill the Great Lord of Zelloque, who lived apart from the world in his palace? The city guard would protect him — and the whole Zelloquan army, if necessary. It didn't make sense — the whole tale didn't make sense! No, someone had lied to Nollin. *That* was the truth.

I said as much.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me," Nollin said. He stood and strode to the door to his sleeping chamber, swinging it open.

An old woman sat quietly on the bed inside, her tear-streaked face a web of wrinkles, her eyes dark and downcast. She held herself with the humility of a peasant — and yet she dressed richly, as a noble might. The image disturbed me. I stared at her, forehead creased, until my brother shut the door

again.

"Who is she?" I demanded.

"Loanu, once the High Priestess of the Shrine of Shon Atasha."

"Once?"

Nollin shrugged. "She dreamed of the coming Tyrant and destroyed the shrine before he could debase it. Now that she is no longer touched by the god's power, she is half-blind. I found her wandering the streets in a daze, trying to warn people. They stoned her as a witch."

"You'd believe an old woman?" I snorted. "You're not my brother!"

"Listen to me! She wept as she spoke — spoke not only of the coming Tyrant, but of great visions of far lands, of gods, of dead kings and their treasures! Her tales will set your heart afire as they have set mine — all you must do is listen to her!"

I shook my head. "No, Nollin. The witch is crazy. Turn her out for the nobles to take care of."

"Come with me — I'm sailing for Pethis in an hour. Together we could win a kingdom!"

"Nollin . . ."

He sighed and I knew I'd won. "Very well," he said. "I can see you're not interested. Go, then, brother — but remember my warning. The Great Lord will soon be dead — and when he is, you must flee. Promise me that."

"I promise — *if* the Great Lord dies."

We stood and started for the door. There I made my mistake — I turned my back on Nollin. Brother or not, I never should've trusted him. I realized it the second I caught a flash of movement from the corner of my eye. He struck me in the head with something hard and heavy.

Darkness washed over me.

II: Nollin Lammiat

Nollin set the brass candlestick back on the table, then sighed as he looked at his brother's still form on the cabin floor. A trickle of blood ran from a shallow cut behind Hilan's left ear. A minor wound; he'd soon recover.

Quickly he stripped Hilan of clothes and jewelry, then bound him with heavy ropes taken from a chest next to the door. He changed into his brother's blue shirt and black pants, then stood in front of his looking glass, adjusting the scarves around his head. Satisfied, he turned — and found Hilan glaring up at him with slitted eyes.

"I trust I won't have to gag you, brother?" Nollin asked.

Hilan spat.

"Not on the carpet, Hilan. Remember your manners."

"I'll kill you for this!"

"You'll thank me soon enough. You always were stubborn — and now I'm going to save your miserable life. Ah, how ironic!"

Hilan growled. "More of your talk. I'll see you in Hell!"

"I promised Father that I'd look after you. I mean to keep that promise, whether you like it or not."

"You promised!" He laughed long and hard. "*Promised!*"

"What's wrong?" Nollin demanded.

"He made me promise the same thing! Never meant to keep it, though. I always hated you."

"Then keep hating me. It'll keep you alive." He opened the door and stepped into his sleeping chamber.

Loanu lay quietly now. He shook her awake. "Witch!"

Opening rheumy eyes, she peered up at him. "Who is it?"

"Nollin. You must help me, if we're to escape the Tyrant."

Her thoughts seemed to clear, for she looked at him with some measure of recognition. She sat up. "What do you ask of me?"

"Use your magic — make me look like my brother for an hour!"

"I have seen your brother," she whispered, "in my dreams. . . ."

Nollin shook her again. "Do it!"

She stared at him. Her lips began to move. He heard nothing at first, then the barest trace of a whisper, then a low crooning song which jangled his nerves and made the hair on the back of his neck bristle. He shivered.

A blue glow surrounded her hands. She raised them to his face, touching his skin gently, tracing the line of his jaw, then his nose, then his forehead. Still she sang.

Nollin's vision grew cloudy and distant, as though he looked at the world through a mask. His cheeks felt heavy and numb.

Loanu sank back on her bed. "The magic is done."

Hurrying to his looking glass, Nollin stared at his image.

Hilan's face looked back at him. He smiled; Hilan's face smiled. He laughed; Hilan laughed. The illusion was perfect.

Turning to Loanu, he gently pushed her back on the bed and pulled the covers around her shoulders. "Sleep well, my witch," he said.

He opened the door and hurried through the chart room, ignoring Hilan's curses, and went on deck. A light breeze gusted from the east, heavy with moisture and electricity. Pausing, he studied the sky. The storm would soon break.

"Wait for my return," he called to the mate on deck, who knew his plan, "but have everything ready."

"Aye, sir," Lossar said. "Ready we'll be."

Nollin went to the *Falcon*, Hilan's ship, and strode up the gangplank like he owned the world. Just as Hilan would've done. He felt a moment's fear when one of the sailors ran forward, but thrust all thoughts of failure from his mind. Since he looked like Hilan, he was Hilan . . . at least to simple-minded fools like these.

"Sir?" the man said.

"Round up the crew. We sail in a half-hour."

"Sir?"

"You heard me — get going!" Nollin sent him sprawling with a back-handed cuff, as he'd often seen Hilan do, then watched as the man climbed to his feet and bobbed his head nervously.

"Yes, sir!" He turned and ran.

Nollin called to the half-dozen other sailors on deck, and they put down whatever they were doing and gathered around.

"Most of you have seen my brother Nollin," he said. "We're joining up with him. Now jump to it!"

They jumped. Nollin watched for a minute, then grunted and turned to the captain's cabin. Removing a key from his waist pocket, he fitted it into the lock, turned, then pushed into the room.

He sat at the small desk and waited. His muscles knotted and he felt sick at his stomach. Time slipped by. How long would the witch's magic last? How long could he fool Hilan's crew? He stared at the looking glass on the wall as if daring it to betray him.

Feet pounded past his door from time to time; men shouted and swore as they climbed the rigging. The decks creaked and shifted against the waves.

He knew the time had come when a light knock sounded on the door.

Opening it, he stepped out and found a tall, thin, square-jawed man standing there. He dressed in brown and black — Rilal, the first mate.

"Sir," Rilal said, "the ship's ready."

"Good." He looked across the deck at the men, nodding slowly. "You will follow the *Serpent*. Keep a close watch on her — make sure no tricks are pulled. I trust my brother — but not far enough to risk my life. Eh?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

"I'll be aboard Nollin's ship. We sail in five minutes. You're in command until I get back. Any questions?"

He grinned. "No, Captain."

III: Hilan Lammiat

I heard a soft tread and looked up. My muscles ached from straining against the ropes, and though I hate to say it, I welcomed the excuse to stop. It wasn't Nollin, returned to gloat, but the old woman . . . what had he called her? Loanu?

She knelt beside me and ran her soft fingers through my hair.

"Cut the ropes," I said.

"There are no ropes." Her voice was soft, almost sing-song, and she didn't look at me.

"Look — on my arms. See them?"

"The time has come. Do you not hear the winds? The end is here. The Tyrant has come."

I strained, but heard no more than the waves and the creaking of the deck.

"He is near. I feel his presence. Shon Atasha protect me!"

Weeping, she collapsed at my side. Her sobs became hysterical. Again I strained at my bonds — with no result. If nothing else, Nollin knew how to tie knots.

The door swung open and he stood there, sweating heavily, a knife in his hand. The *Serpent* lurched, suddenly, and I knew the moorings had been cast off. Then I noticed the scar on his face — *my* face!

"I'm going to kill you!" I screamed at him. "*Nollin!*"

"It's here," he said softly. There was a stunned look on his face.

"*Let me loose!*"

"Yes . . . yes." He looked down as if noticing me for the first time. "Yes — there's no time. You must help with the ship. We have to get out of port — the fighting's started!"

I stared at him as he bent and slit my ropes.

"Fighting?"

"All up and down the docks. We barely got away in time."

I stood, shoving him out of the way. *You bastard. Kill you later.*

Clambering out onto the deck, I stared in shock at Zelloque.

The entire city blazed with light. The houses burned. The shops burned. Flames danced among the tall, splendid buildings. Dark shapes moved through the smoke-filled streets and down piers, throwing torches onto the ships. The proud schooners and galleys flared brightly. Over the distant slap-slap of waves I heard the screams of dying men.

I shivered. Nollin was suddenly standing beside me.

"Look," he said, pointing.

I turned. A hundred yards away the *Falcon* slipped through the darkness, as silent as a ghost, sails white and full. My ship. Nollin had saved my ship. If he'd allowed me to stay in Zelloque . . .

Suddenly I didn't know what to say. I turned and looked at him. His face shimmered for an instant in the starlight — and then the scar faded and he was Nollin again, the same as ever. He grinned back like nothing had happened between us.

"Blood's thick," he said.

"Blood's thick," I agreed, and shivered again. The breeze had grown colder; I stood there in my undergarments. "I want my clothes back, though."

He turned toward his cabin. "They're too small for me, anyway."

I didn't follow him. Though we would never speak of this night again, I'd always remember what Nollin had done for me, and I'd never be the same.

I watched the city die, and with it, my hatred. I knew I should have burned there as well.

My brother, my brother. Why do you love me?

He came back in a minute and slipped a blanket around my shoulders. Together for the first time, we waited for dawn.

SELLING A SHORT

Shoot the sheriff in paragraph one
That's always the way it should be done
Or if you're writing a different style
Unleash the aliens for a while

Then when you get to paragraph two
And haven't the faintest what to do
Add mutants, robots, a ray-gun fight
I'm sure your story will come out right

Don't stop to explain, you'll spoil the fun
Just make real sure your hero can run
Mention him jogging, toss out a clue
So your reader will wonder what's to do

But that will get him to turn the page
Where your villain fumes in such a rage
He tosses the good guy out the lock
Without a suit, a devilish crock

Lucky for him, the sheriff's not dead
Your aliens' faces get beet red
They all see the light, think it's dawn
Which frightens the bad guy, just a pawn

Of the Flying Dutchman, Ambrose Bierce
A judge, a flyer, all of 'em fierce
At seeing their plot to rule the world
Thrown for a loss by a stitch unpurled

So see how easy it is to do
Now that I've done all the work for you
Just type it and mail it off, and then
You're an author now, do it again.

— Michael A. Winters

ALONG THE SAN PENNATUS FAULT

by R. A. Lafferty

art: Stephen Fabian

The feathered race with pinions skim the air.
Not so the mackerel, and still less the bear.

— John Hookham Frere

And now the young dudes have all taken to wearing feathers on
their faces. What next, Quinctius, what next?

— Cato the Younger

That was the summer they all had a lot of fun around the San Pennatus Fault Crest.

"Here on the edge of the San Pennatus Fault we are on the 'Edge of Monsters' also," the ever-rational Isidore Merriman said. "We can only hope that they will be hopeful monsters. Maybe. Some of the time. It's true that our experiments have been plagued by the 'Unreality Syndrome.' Well, such plagues are always among the things we have to deal with. We've had a bad streak of 'hopeless monsters,' and I don't know what we'll do if we have any more of them."

"Oh, we'll continue to cover them up," the elegant Merald Hilltop said. "Sometimes they're amusing. Sometimes they're horrifying. And sometimes they're simply not to be lived with. The Flying Turtle Sydney, what are we to think of him? He's sure to crash and be killed soon, and yet he seems to be perfectly designed for flying. Nobody could have dreamed of a more perfectly designed-for-flight turtle: and so, as we are the designers in this Institute, I suppose that we have designed him. It's no secret that our fondest hope at this break-through biotechnic college is 'that man may fly,' that he may fly by a great and instant leap. So our 'think flight, think bird, think feathers' may have slopped over a little bit. It's just that Sydney is so clumsy at handling his flying muscles yet. And they do gall him where they come through his carapace. The 'Unreality Syndrome' is certainly strongly represented in Sydney, *and yet he does fly!* But how did it happen? And what have we contributed to his metamorphosis, except perhaps an enhanced anxiety threshold?"

"Likely an enhanced anxiety threshold is all that it takes. *We are* on the edge of the San Pennatus Fault waiting for genetic earthquakes to happen, and all instrumentation indicates that they are most likely to happen here," Josef Prorok (always a resoundingly indecisive man) spoke strongly. "Put enough stress on a point and it will rupture. One more feather's weight added to the stress should do it. We're that close. All our anxiety meters indicate that the rupture point will probably be reached on the Fault today

Along the San Pennatus Fault 87

or tomorrow.”

“It almost seems as if somebody is throwing diversions in the way of it,” Anselm Salto commented. “However he has happened, Sydney the Flying Turtle is outrageous! But if he is a hoax, then how was he brought about and by whom? One day he was an ordinary (though very intelligent) slack-water turtle. And the next morning he had grown wings and was flying, though in a clumsy fashion. Was that only this morning? Yes, it was. And he’s the same creature. I’d know those brown eyes and that ‘huk-huk-huk’ grunt of his anywhere.”

Meanwhile, while these six directors of the San Pennatus Fault College were discussing their incipient breakthroughs, several younger persons were visiting the same Flying Turtle Sydney.

“Turtle Sydney has dreams of flying,” Roxanna Dropforge said, “and they are possibly the most convincing dreams that any turtle ever had. He dreams that he is flying, and the people who see him flying in his dreams believe that he is flying, and an analysis of the facts divulges that he is indeed flying. But ‘indeed flying’ is a tricky business. Oh Turtle Dreams, Turtle Dreams!”

“We would have better luck if we called it ‘Quantum Eideticism’ instead of ‘Turtle Dreams,’ Roxanna,” Anatole Prorok said. Anatole was eighteen years old and Roxanna Dropforge was twelve. They had been in on ‘project turtle’ more than any of the others in their bunch.

Back to the Six Directors of the San Pennatus Fault College again!

“Clumsy or not, Sydney’s flying works,” Isidore Merriman said. “It’s really something new in flying. I’d have said that the problems involved in turtle flight were unsolvable, but every one of them has been solved in the most amazing way I ever saw. What we have wrought!”

“Well, the ‘Showboat Syndrome’ has broken out in quite a few of our animals,” Masterman Jordan said. “Hermione the Anaconda is sporting one red eye and one green eye this morning. Of course I suspect hoax, but in this case the hoax seems to be disavowed in advance. Last week, when the Calf Rob Roy showed up with American Flags on both his eyeballs, there was no doubt that it was a hoax. And it was. Contact lenses. An elaborate hoaxer had fitted Rob Roy with contact lenses. They were well-made, and they did correct his defective vision. And the American Flags on each eyeball did cut down on the light to which he was supersensitive. I blame your son for the hoax, Godwin, and you blame mine. Likely they were in it together. But it insured that contact lenses were the first thing we’d look for this time, and that’s not what it is. It’s much deeper. I believe that there has been very intricate gene tampering with that snake. I’ve run every possible test on Hermione and I can’t find out the mechanism employed. It’s a good thing she’s a good-natured snake, but I feel that she’s not on our side in this. Anyhow she won’t, or can’t, give me an explanation for the phenomenon of her



eyes. After all, she has a vocabulary of only forty-nine words. 'Hoke joke, Jord,' she says, and that's all the explanation she'll give. Well, it's a sign that there's genetic energy burgeoning all over the place. Maybe the quake-and-break here at the San Pennatus Fault will come as early as today."

And while the Six Directors of the San Pennatus Fault College were discussing their intimations of saltations for their project, several younger persons were visiting the same female Anaconda Hermione whom the directors had been discussing.

"Anaconda Hermione has dreams in which she has one red eye and one green eye," Irene Jordan said. "She dreams that she has such eyes now, and the people who see her dreaming also believe that she has one red eye and one green eye. These may be the most convincing dreams that any snake ever had. You'd convince me that your eyes really did look like that, Hermione, if I didn't know better. Oh, Snake Dreams!"

"Hoke joke, Ire," the Anaconda snake Hermione said.

"Anatole says that we should call it 'Quantum Eideticism,' rather than 'Snake Dreams,' Irene," Dobzhansky Hilltop said. "'Quantum Eideticism' is more scientifically acceptable than is 'Snake Dreams'."

"Right-O. Oh, Right-O," Irene Jordan said.

"Right-O," repeated Hermione the Anaconda snake. Well, 'right-o' was one of the forty-nine words in Hermione's vocabulary. Irene Jordan, Dobzhansky Hilltop, and Hermione the Anaconda were all of them twelve years old and were very close friends.

Back to the six-directors-in-serious-talk again.

"Maybe the quake-and-break came as early as *yesterday*," Godwin Dropforge said. "One hundred kilos of estrogen-gel has disappeared; and an undisclosed number (but it runs into the billions) of blank helices. Also forty-four different chemicals and agars. It is either biotechnic thieves at work around here, or else it is the biotechnic-oriented offspring of some of us. I hope it's thieves. They're less disastrous. That special estrogen-gel costs a thousand dollars a kilo (but it's a good general-purpose matrix), and we've been having multiple thefts of that magnitude every day. Oh, it's costly, costly! But all shortages and thefts are reported as 'usage,' and that makes us seem busier than we are."

These six were all intelligent and innovative gentlemen, the Directors of the San Pennatus Fault College. Five of them, Josef Prorok, Anselm Salto, Masterman Jordan, Isidore Merriman, and Godwin Dropforge, were neo-neo-Darwinians. And the sixth of them, Merald Hilltop, was neo-neo-neo-Darwinian. Theirs was a well-funded establishment, made up entirely of graduate students, all of them laboratory-smart and prone to speculation.

These six intelligent and innovative directors of the College-Institute lived with their families in six houses on San Pennatus Fault Crest. To the South, below them, was the whole spread of the College with its botanical

and zoological gardens, and the attendant town, all running down to a rough ocean shore and reefs beyond. Above them, to the North, was the 'World Outside,' the happy hills of Weaver County and of other counties, states, and realms.

And these six leaders-and-directors were secure in their positions.

"We are the vanguard," Isidore Merriman said. "Our chosen field is the most important in the world. It answers the question 'Where is the World going?' And ours are the most important minds in our field. Really, I don't believe that there is any higher intelligence anywhere than right here in our group."

"I'm not sure of that," Godwin Dropforge dissented. "I have an uncanny feeling that there is a higher and unearthly intelligence all around us every day."

"Please don't get deistic on us, Godwin," Josef Prorok spoke sharply and frostily. "That is quite unacceptable as well as being in bad taste."

"I am not getting deistic. I wasn't referring to a Deus. I was thinking of the minds of our closely knit, biotechnic-oriented offspring, our own eerie sons and daughters. They are completely unearthly in some of the things they come up with, and they have us totally surrounded."

The closely knit, biotechnic-oriented offspring were twelve young teen-people: Anatole and Judy Prorok, Job and Cecilia Salto, Darwin and Irene Jordan, Cracraft and Davoreen Merriman, Chardin and Roxanna Dropforge, Dobzhansky and Maryethyl Hilltop, a full dozen of them. Their capsule description above is not quite correct, seven of them not yet being teen-agers, strictly speaking; four of them being just twelve years old, one eleven, one ten, and one — Maryethyl Hilltop — eight years old. But these were balanced by Anatole Prorok being eighteen, Cecilia Salto being nineteen, and Darwin Jordan being sixteen.

All were the pride of their parents for being inclined towards biotechnic studies, and all of them were the consternation of those elder parents for their antic approaches.

Several other incidents of perhaps saltatory evolution had appeared that day. One duck had begun to sing like a meadowlark. Then all the other ducks had savagely attacked the singing duck in outrage at its unnaturalness, and the singing duck had to be rescued by humans. Well, saltations are not always bloodless.

"But what we are looking for are *human* incidents," Masterman Jordan said sadly. "It may be that some of the build-up-to-the-brink bio-energy is being bled off to the animals, and we want it to have effect on humans. But how to explain that to the genes of the animals and the people!"

And now, just at dusk of a Tuesday evening, all twelve of the young people were gathered in a copse of small trees known as Merlin's Circle atop the

San Pennatus Fault Crest. They had a jug and twelve cups. Nobody seemed to notice them except a rough man of the town below them, Titus Chesty, a bachelor who was both a woman-hater and a man-hater, a man who liked to wander around in the dusk with a rifle cradled in the crook of his arm.

"What are you hunting for with a rifle in the evening light?" people asked him sometimes.

"For my supper," Titus would always say. "Maybe I'll shoot me a coon or a colt, or a young badger or a young human, or a calf or a sheep that the owners would hardly miss. The hungrier I get the better I shoot."

Titus Chesty was not well liked. He was quarrelsome and he had a mordant humor and he turned most people off.

"What if, when we —" began Maryethyl Hilltop, who was the youngest of all of them gathered in the little copse of trees on the crest.

"The time for 'what ifs' on this particular thing is past," said Cecilia Salto who was the oldest of them. "We are all in this project together. It takes twelve of us to make a quantum project out of it."

"My father Merald Hilltop is all hep on the goal 'that man may fly,'" said Dobzhansky Hilltop. "He preaches 'Think flight, think bird, think feathers.' But I think the concept should be sharpened. You have to pick a bird. Let's 'think ducks, think ducks, think ducks.' OK?"

Anatole poured the twelve cups full.

"Is this all of it?" Job Salto asked.

"No, no, I've got a big keg of it," Anatole said. "And I can always make more." All of them drank off their brimming cups with slurping gulps. Then all of them smashed their ritual clay cups on a rock. This is a technique that is not in the repertoire of every biotechnician.

"**W**hy are you cutting that big hole in your best dress, Roxanna?" her mother Molly Dropforge asked the next morning. "I'm just asking because mothers are supposed to show an occasional interest in their children."

"It isn't my best dress; it's my worst dress; it's just my most expensive dress. I'm cutting a hole in it to let my tail feathers come through."

"Oh? You *do* have tail feathers today, don't you? And you have feathers on your face and neck also. And you have duck feet. Don't you have any shoes big enough to go over them?"

"No I don't, mama. I don't believe they make shoes big enough."

"Well, just why do you have all those funny things?"

"Oh, to get used to them for a school play I'm in."

"What's the name of the play?"

"The play is 'The Feather-Merchants.' It's not for a week yet. I just want to get used to these things in plenty of time."

"Roxanna, those are *real*! Those are *real* tail-feathers growing out of your *real* rump."

"Oh sure. Modern stage-craft demands reality nowadays."

There was a slight disturbance a little bit later that morning. Word got out that the twelve kids from the houses on the Crest all had feathers growing on their faces, and tail feathers growing out of their tails, and duck-feet. So a group of boys and men (and girls and women) came up from the town to the college-area with the noisy intent of killing all the young people who had blossomed out in feathers and duck-feet during the night. The blind intensity and plain truculence of the mob reminded one of the behavior of that mob of ducks who had tried, the day before, to kill the duck who had begun to sing like a meadowlark. And it was the case this morning that the twelve young people had to be rescued by a platoon of security guards, with a fair amount of bloodshed, just as the singing duck had to be rescued by resolute humans yesterday.

The leader of the mob from town was the wrathful man Titus Chesty. He was very often angry, even when there was less than this to be angry about.

"The response of the townspeople was the biologically correct one and the predicted one, of course," Josef Prorok said. "That's why we have a platoon of security guards here this week. The response was the biologically correct one, and it testifies to the authenticity of the saltation."

"To the authenticity of *what*?" asked a TV man. Lots of media persons had been gathering all that morning.

"To the authenticity of the saltation, of the evolutionary leap."

"What's the by-word?" Cecilia Salto asked nervously before the duck-footed bunch of them went in to face their six sires, the six directors of the college. And, Oh yes, whole batteries of media persons.

"Drink bottled water, drink bottled everything!" Anatole Prorok gave the command. "I poured the rest of the keg into the reservoir last night. It should begin to hit the town and the college today. And I had two more jugs of it that I've been using for quicker results. It should begin to hit the people in the Conference Room very soon. I don't know how long till the effect will leave us or how long till it will take over the other people, but for the sake of elegance it should be about the same time. Oh, quite soon."

"Anatole, leaving out the fancy names of it, what *is* the stuff?" Roxanna asked.

"*Euelpis Elixirion Papia Pedema*. It's a Quantum Eidetic Mind-Expander with a special slant."

"Happy Hopping Duck Elixir, is that it? Duck Dream Dope. Anatole, is this *real* that has happened to us?" Irene asked.

"No, not strictly real, but it's real in the eyes of all beholders, including ourselves. Things can seem real for many thousands of years and still not be completely real except in the eyes of conditioned observers. One theory is that humans are still eighteen-inch-high creatures scurrying around in a

stooped-over position, but that to the eyes of all beholders including themselves they are near four times that tall and straighter and more human. That's the way they have seemed for quite a few millennia, tall and noble and straight. There is only one creature that is not fooled by this tricky assumed appearance. It's a very rare type of African hyena. It will rush in on any human, take it by its fifteen-inch-high throat, and kill it on the spot every time. And then it will immediately devour all the soft parts of it."

"Anatole, you made that part up just now," Roxanna Dropforge charged.

"Yes, I suppose I did. But there really isn't any reality, only choices between various groups of metaphors. But I like that one I just made up. I'll polish it up and use it again sometime. Now don't be intimidated before our famous parents or the famous media people in there. Just remember that we'll change places very soon. Then we will be as we used to be, and *they'll* be feathered and duck-footed very soon. Unless, of course, our condition is indeed real."

A cheer went up from the crowd in the big banquet-hall-lecture-room when the twelve young persons duck-walked in.

"Behold!" cried Anselm Salto, "the final vindication of saltatory evolution! And it's come about just as we predicted that it would, by quantum speciation. As the immortal Stephen Stanley wrote, 'It is generally agreed that quantum speciation takes place within very small populations — some would say populations involving fewer than ten individuals.' Well, twelve individuals comes very close to being less than ten."

"Why wouldn't it be much more likely that such an astonishing thing as this, humans suddenly acquiring feathers and acquiring duck-feet overnight, should happen to one person only, and not to ten or twelve?" asked a network person named John Anchorman.

"Such things probably happen to single individuals very frequently and are hushed up," Anselm Salto explained, "for there could be no issue for the changes. With whom would the single individual mate to preserve the changes? Only with another person who had received such a saltatory mutation as had himself. But now, on the verge of the San Pennatus Fault, the biologic energy is too powerful to be contained in a single individual. And here it is perfect. There are six males and six females. And they will mate and preserve the mutations. What a selective mating of such wonderful stocks! They will mate, they will mate!"

"Right now, papa?" Cecilia Salto asked.

"But doesn't every revolutionary jump serve some advantage?" John Anchorman pursued. "What is the advantage of feathers and duck-feet to humans?"

"Now we can fly. The eternal dream will be realized. Humans will finally fly."

"But we haven't any wings, father," Job Salto protested.

"You have feathers, and feathers are certainly an intimation of wings. Some of you even have a few elbow-feathers. I will call them pinion-feathers, and perhaps your elbows will have turned into wing-pinions by tomorrow."

"Something is wrong with either this chair or me," John Anchorman the TV person protested. "I sure can't sit in it very well. Something is wrong, something is wrong!" John Anchorman downed another glass of ice water.

"Well, there are certainly no *disadvantages* to humans having feathers and duck-feet," Isidore Merriman took up the slightly different line of argument. "And where there is no disadvantage in a big change, there will usually be hidden advantages. They should appear any time."

"There is one disadvantage, father," Cracraft Merriman said. "With these tail-feathers, we can't sit down at all. And we can't lie down on our backs. That's why I wakened so early this morning in such discomfort. And when we lie on our faces, the face-feathers seem to get in the way of our breathing. We get the duck-feather asthma. I don't like it. I think there are disadvantages."

"Sitting down was always a temporary and unsatisfactory expedient for humans," Masterman Jordan said. "No human was ever comfortable sitting down. Some humans sit cross-legged on the ground or the floor to try to find a comfortable way to do it, but in vain. Maybe now you can learn to hunker down on your ankles the way country people sometimes do. Or you could learn to perch on branches the way birds do. You are bird-people now."

"We're not talon-footed, we're duck-footed. We aren't built for perches. We aren't built for anything," Darwin Jordan maintained. "Papa, this thing isn't practical."

"Oh, it's likely only a series of slight discomforts before the full implications of the wonder-changes are apparent," Merald Hilltop suggested. "This is a great day for the San Pennatus Fault College and for neo-neo-neo-Darwinism."

"This is the day you get sued for billions, unless you find a way to reverse this nonsense immediately," a testy media lady said suddenly. "I have feathers growing on my face right now. I have taken my shoes off because they made my feet hurt, and I don't like what I see there. I will never sit in a chair again unless there is some very successful surgery on me. People, you're in trouble, and so are we."

And then there was old-fashioned bedlam and pandemonium in the big banquet-hall-lecture-room. Almost everybody caught the feathers-and-duck-foot saltations at the same time.

"People, people, people," Josef Prorok begged. "Give it a chance to work. This is probably the greatest thing that's happened to us since we came down out of the trees."

"People, people," Anselm Salto begged. "It isn't as bad as it seems. Maybe it will wear off, if you want it to wear off. Remember that nobody

has died of it yet. Just keep saying to yourself 'Nobody has died from it yet.' That's bound to make you feel better."

The platoon of Security Guards was ordered to restore order.

"We will restore order when we are people again," the platoon Lieutenant said. "We will not restore order while we are a bunch of duck-footed, duck-feathered monstrosities. What is this anyhow, some kind of shaggy-duck joke?"

"Hoke joke, folk, on you," said Hermione the Anaconda snake who had a vocabulary of forty-nine words. She was in the doorway looking in at the melee. "Right-O," she said, and slithered away again.

By the next morning, almost everybody in town and college had caught the feathers-and-duck-foot saltations. Everybody except Rory Brandywine the Village Atheist. Rory didn't believe in evolution, and he had other disbeliefs. He didn't believe in drinking water for instance. And somehow he didn't catch the new disease. But everybody else in the area served by the reservoir caught it.

But the original twelve, the children of the Prorok, Salto, Jordan, Merri-man, Dropforge, and Hilltop families, with them it was greatly diminished by that second day. And by evening they all could wear shoes again, and their feathers were going, going, gone.

"This is horrible!" Josef Prorok cried out. "The greatest treasure offered to mankind in forty thousand years is dribbling away, and how can we stop the dribbling? What can we do, what can we do?"

"You and almost everyone else still have a full case of the feathers-and-duck-foot saltations, father," Irene Jordan said. "The only ones who've lost it are us twelve kids."

"But it was only a one-day phenomenon with you. How can it last longer with us? Oh, the loss, the loss, the loss!"

Most of the people in the region had lost their anger of the day before, however, and had begun to see the situation as funny. They couldn't sit down, they couldn't do anything very well, but it seemed funny now that it appeared that it would be temporary. And some of the shaggy-duck jokes that sprang up in the populace were really funny.

Well, the saltation might have lasted quite a while except for the nine-inch rain that fell on the area that night and flushed the reservoir out pretty thoroughly. And in three more days, the stuff was pretty well drained out of the mains and service pipes, and people returned to normal.

"You could make some more of the stuff, Anatole," Davoreen Merriman said, "and then we could have all the fun all over again."

"I could get killed too," Anatole said. "It was too close. I think I'll drop biotechnics entirely and go into something a little more erudite."

"Lost, lost, lost," the elegant Merald Hilltop mourned. "There were two

thousand of the duck-people here, and now there are none at all left. Lost, lost, lost!"

"I didn't think one would do any good, papa, would it?" Maryethyl Hilltop said. "I thought there had to be at least two so you could mate them."

"With one there might be a scant half-a-chance. We'd shake down the whole world to find the mate who looked most like a duck-woman. We'd try with him again and again and again. We'd never give up. Why, daughter, why? Do you know of one? Tell me, tell me!"

"Well, there is one, but he said he'd kill me if I told. He's shut himself up in his shack and he sure would be hard to take. He meant it when he said that he'd kill me if I told."

"We must all make sacrifices for science, Maryethyl," her mother Lucretia Hilltop advised her, "even if somebody kills you."

"Well, it's that Titus Chesty who always blows his top about everything. He's an old bachelor because he hates women. You'll sure play hob trying to mate him with a duck-woman. But he's got the worst case of the saltations anybody ever saw, and I think — his elbows are turning into wing pinions."

"Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful," the elegant Merald Hilltop gloated. "We'll get all the legal attachments on him and then we'll seize him."

At first Titus Chesty was fairly reasonable. Between his rifle shots out of his shack he'd call out fairly reasonable questions.

"By what right do you propose to seize me?" he called.

"By the right of Eminent Domain," three government lawyers called back in unison. "You have been declared a World Resource under the Bio-technic Act of 2012. You must mate with all the more duck-like women we find on our worldwide search so that the evolutionary saltation be not in vain."

"You have no Eminent Domain over me," Titus Chesty called back, and he fired his rifle sharply.

"Oh but we have!" cried the two remaining government lawyers. "We have a special enactment right here."

"That for your special enactment," Titus called back, and shot again.

"We had better get two back-up lawyers up here for the negotiations," said the one remaining government lawyer.

"Why don't we just point a howitzer at his shack and blow him and it away?" one of the Security Guards asked.

"No, no, we have to have him alive and unharmed," Josef Prorok said.

"He's not shooting as sharp as he used to," said one of the townsmen who knew Titus well. "After his elbow finishes turning into a wing, I bet he won't be any better shot than the average man."

"It's a hope, it's a hope!" Masterman Jordan spoke fervently.

The sun went down and the moon came up.


"He's bound to run out of ammunition soon," Isidore Merriman said.

"No he isn't either," a townsman argued. "He has boxes of ammunition stacked from floor to roof of his shanty. He has boxes of everything stacked from floor to roof of his shanty. He'll not run out of food or shot or anything."

Whether his elbows were turning into wing-pinions or not, Titus Chesty could still shoot. Every Security Guard who stuck his nose from behind his tree lost the end of his nose.

Judy Prorok and Irene Jordan and Roxanne Dropforge made up a hoe-down ballad named "The Man Who Wouldn't Mate with Duck-Women." They got a couple hundred people singing it. It had a catchy tune.

"That's a peachy ballad," Roxanne said. "That's a ducky ballad."

That was the Summer they all had a lot of fun around the San Pennatus Fault Crest. 

The amazing Mr. Lafferty, who has been entertaining us with his unique stories for the past twenty-five years, has recently enjoyed a series of deluxe editions from Corroboree Press, including the much-delayed publication of his Dana Cosquin tetralogy, of which two volumes, Half a Sky and The Flame is Green, have already appeared.

Lafferty was interviewed by Darrell Schweitzer in our September 1983 issue. His stories have become less frequent of late, but we will continue to present them whenever we can.

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DONOVAN'S MIKADO; or, I've Got a Little Lust

(Sung to the tune of Gilbert & Sullivan's "Tit Willow")

In a jar in the lab I discovered a brain
That said "*Data, more data, more data.*"
How it spoke is a thing that I cannot explain;
It said: "*Data, more data, more data.*"
So I said to it: "Brain, tell me why do you stew
In a pickle-jar full of formaldehyde goo?"
But the brain only answered, as brains often do:
"*Give me data, more data, more data.*"

Then I said: "Tell me, brain, did your body decay?
Were your organs removed like errata?
Did some scientist throw your whole body away,
And regard it *persona non grata*?
Can you feel much?" I asked. "Are you conscious of pain?"
But I heard no reply from that pickle-jar brain;
All it did was continue its endless refrain:
"*Give me data, more data, more data.*"

"*I shall conquer the world,*" said the brain. "*I shall rule
While I float in this jar of phlegmata.*"
And the brain bobbed about in its chemical pool
While it chortled a gleeful cantata.
"*I'll enslave all Mankind,*" said that sinister brain,
"*And the whole planet Earth will become my domain,
But before I take over, I'll have to obtain
Much more data, more data, more data.*"

"Too bad," I remarked, "but your plan of attack
Comes with certain small flaws and stigmata."
Then I carried the brain to a cesspool out back
That descends through the bedrock and strata.
"Happy landings," I said, and I dropped it inside.
"*Let me out!*" shrieked the brain. As it fell, I replied:
"Out of *where*? When and how? Please, you'll have to provide
Much more data, more data, more data!"

— F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

(With apologies to the makers of the 1953 film *Donovan's Brain*.)

RACCOONS

by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

art: George Barr





Kevin O'Donnell, Jr., has been selling short SF since 1973, and subsequently novels as well. Berkley has published the popular McGill Feighan series, beginning with Caverns (1981); look for the new fourth book, Cliffs.

His "Linehan Alone" appeared in our July 1984 issue . . . and makes us wonder about his giving bit parts to raccoons.

A trash can clattered behind the stable. I groaned. So now the damn raccoons were launching daylight raids. How long would it be before they kicked down the back door and carted off the refrigerator? No wonder the real estate agent had left wildlife off her list of reasons for buying an abandoned New England farm.

Three items she did list had sold me on the place: the peace and quiet, lack of which had driven me out of New York after seven harassed years. As a self-employed money manager for a few small pension funds, I could live anywhere that suited me, as long as the telephone system worked and the power stayed on.

The price, which in total came to less than the down payment on a nice co-op in the City.

And, finally, the clincher: within half an hour of the farm lay more antique-filled barns, attics, and basements than I could pick through in sixty years. My hobby had grown into a lucrative sideline, and I had to stay close to my sources of supply.

Another can crashed and rolled.

Setting the coffee mug on the kitchen table, I got to my feet. No sense giving the little bandits time to scatter orange peels and soda cans all over the yard. Besides, the markets opened in forty-five minutes; before flicking on the modem and placing the day's orders, I needed to call the MacGruder woman. She wanted to sell her great-grandmother's armoire; I wanted that beauty in my basement before any larger dealers got wind of it. If they intended to buy it, they could buy it from me at my usual markup.

The kitchen door opened on a dazzling May morning. Blinking into the sun, inhaling the fresh scent of spring, I tiptoed down the rickety wood steps and grabbed a handful of rocks. A few well-thrown stones should drive the masked marauders off; and, if Pavlov knew his stuff, they would think twice about coming back.

The old arm had never met NFL standards, but even eight years after my last college pass, I could still zip a football through the window of a speeding car from thirty yards. Poor raccoons.

Grinning, I took two strides across the patio. My eyes finally adjusted to the brilliance. Astonishment numbed me. My fingers opened; the rocks clacked onto the concrete.

A low stone wall runs along the west slope of my small valley and holds back the hillside during the rains. That fine morning, seven muddy corpses slumped against it.

Three of them were human.

The other four . . .

. . . could not possibly exist, so for the moment I ignored them.

The three dead men looked to be soldiers — combat infantry from their boots and bandoliers and torn camouflage outfits. The hundred feet between them and me blurred their insignia and the stenciling above their tunic pockets, but what each cradled in his dead arms resembled nothing so much as a sawed-off shotgun with a chrome onion soldered to the end of its barrel.

The sun fell full on three mud-streaked faces, accentuating high, broad cheekbones, glinting off lifeless eyes. They were stocky, muscular men whose air of hardness clung even in death, but the skin beneath the mud looked bleached. Like black-and-white photographs inflated to three dimensions. Or like whatever had killed them had sucked all the blood from their bodies.

And they nestled between the other four. . . .

You know those small birds you see in every city everywhere — the ones you call sparrows on Mondays and wrens on Tuesdays? Visualize them the size of small whales. With talons like longshoremen's hooks. And beaks like post-hole diggers — but bigger.

Gaping, I stood stock-still until motion flickered in my peripheral vision: ten live soldiers sprinting across the lawn. They paid me no attention. Carrying the same deformed guns as the dead men, they ran half-crouched beneath massive backpacks, fanning out in all directions, here pressing up against a maple tree, there dropping to their bellies and wriggling to the ridgetop through the underbrush that covered the east slope.

Another approached me, stopping a yard away. Good running-back material. Maybe six foot tall, with shrewd black eyes and curly brown hair, he had shoulders that would fill a doorway. He stank of sweat. Tilting his head back, he studied me briefly, then said something in a foreign language.

I spread my hands. "I don't understand a word of it, buddy. If you understand me, would you tell me what the Hell is going on here? You guys aren't Russian, are you?"

He turned his head and gave a short, sharp whistle. Another soldier came trotting up. Built to the same dimensions as the first, he had sandy hair and lake-blue eyes. Curls — an officer, I assumed — rattled off a few terse syllables. The second jabbed me lightly in the belly with his gun, and jerked his dimpled chin toward the house.

"Hey!"

He poked again, a touch harder.

I confess my stupidity, but attribute it to shock and to reflex.

The gun moved —
And so did I.

Left hand waved up, distracting, confusing; right hand snaked down, under the barrel, then caught the cold metal and yanked.

I had the gun. Blue-eyes had empty hands.

Curls backed up a pace, whistled again, and raised his own left hand. The rest of the soldiers stopped in mid-sprint and spun. Every gun in the yard found me in its cross hairs.

It seemed a good time to move v-e-r-y slowly.

I nodded, forced a smile, and said, "Don't. Poke." Then, still holding the gun by its barrel, I extended it to the soldier. Left index finger touching my stomach, I shook my head. "No. Don't poke."

Eyebrows raised, he took the weapon. He aimed it at me.

The officer dropped his left hand.

The others resumed their dispersal.

Blue-eyes stepped out of snatching range, and pointed to the back door. He said something harsh and guttural.

Figuring it had to mean "Move it," I moved.

They followed me into the dim kitchen, their boots shedding mud cakes with every clomping step. The soldier gestured to a chair; I sat, and groped for the coffee mug. Its heat surprised me. So many extraordinary things had happened that surely it should have cooled.

The two men shrugged off their packs and dropped them by the door. Curls strolled around, opening cupboards, hefting cookware, peering into the refrigerator. He popped the top off the percolator, sniffed the aroma of fine Colombian coffee, and made a face.

Then he spotted the morning paper, still rolled and bound with a rubber band.

He opened it, spread it flat on the tabletop, and went to his backpack for a flat plastic case maybe three inches square. The case opened like a woman's compact and actually did contain a mirror. Or so I thought, till he laid it shiny side down on the newspaper and began to wipe the page with it, starting at the top and moving to the bottom.

"All right, if you're going to ignore me —" I reached for the business section.

Curls tapped the back of my hand with one finger.

So I drank my coffee instead.

Blue-eyes, meanwhile, had found the five-inch TV on the counter next to the toaster. He stared hard at it for a few seconds, traced the cord to the wall socket, and beckoned me over.

Good idea. The morning news should still be on. Maybe they could explain the army out back. I flicked the switch. The newscaster's smile filled the tiny screen; her voice rang: "—plosion at the waste disposal company broke windows for miles around. Flames incinerated thousands of bar-

rels of toxic waste; EPA investigators are on the scene to assess possible public health hazards. Though officials of the firm would not comment on the extent of their liability, informed sources predict billions of dollars in claims. In other news —”

I swallowed wrong and almost choked. “The name, damn it, the name!”

Blue-eyes looked askance at me. The newscaster ignored both of us.

Half a dozen of the pension funds I managed had substantial holdings in waste disposal companies — did we have a piece of this one? I hoped to God not, because if we did, and if Blue-eyes and Curls kept me from unloading its stock at the opening bell . . . I shuddered. They might as well just shoot me. It would be a quicker, cleaner death.

The first hour of trading would ravage that company’s stock price as everybody and his brother bailed out. Everybody except me.

Six chief financial officers would howl for my scalp. And get it.

Bye-bye, reputation. So long, clients. Hello, welfare. . . .

Looking bored with the television, the soldier flicked the set off. He tapped the top of the toaster-oven and raised one eyebrow.

I could never pantomime the workings of a toaster-oven, least of all when worrying about financial ruin. I would have to demonstrate it. But why not? Apparently potential disaster had made me hungry. I threw in four slices of raisin bread, got the butter, and refilled my mug.

I pointed to a cup, to the coffee pot, and to Blue-eyes. He shook his head and peered through the glass door as the coils reddened and the bread browned. The toaster-oven went **ding!** He twitched, then lowered the door. The perfume of freshly-toasted raisin bread filled the kitchen.

With him studying my every move, I buttered a piece and bit into it. He waited till I swallowed, then helped himself to two slices. Refusing the butter, he scarfed the toast dry. My throat hurt just watching it.

Curls had worked his way through the paper to the sports section when something beeped. The dark side of the mirror flashed a dull ruby. Popping it back in its case, he studied the other side of the “compact” carefully. Angular characters crawled across its face.

He smiled, and pulled at his left forearm. The skin of his wrist peeled away from a keyboard maybe one inch by two. With the nail of his little finger, he tapped key after key, pausing three times to squint at the writing on the compact.

At last he cleared his throat. “Do you understand me now?”

My jaw dropped.

He frowned. “I said, do you understand me now?” He spoke rapidly, in a sort of clipped British accent. Impatience tinged his words.

“Yeah — uh, I mean, yes, I do understand you.”

“No need to raise your voice; my hearing is perfect. You may call me Captain Mirai.”

I sat down abruptly. “How did you —” I looked from the newspaper to

the compact to the shiny panel in his wristbones. "Did that translate —"

"Don't be silly. I've over thirty thousand languages in here —" Mirai tapped the back of his skull. "— the problem is one of recognition. So many are in archival storage, you see. The reader simply recognizes the language and tells me its address. Much quicker than keying through them a hundred at a time."

"Oh. Sure. Obviously." I made a mental note to review analyses of the defense industries. Any company working on gadgets like those belonged in QB's portfolios. Assuming, of course, Free World investors could buy into them. . . . "Um, ah, can you tell me what's going on?"

"Us, you mean?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Yes!"

"Ah, well . . . not at all unusual, you know, but the porter took a direct hit just as I'd finished punching up the coordinates for our pullout. Some circuits burned out." He made a sound of disgust deep in his throat. "So instead of Base Roqir we find ourselves here, on —" He glanced briefly at the ceiling. "Earth. Pfah!"

It finally sank in: To need thirty thousand languages, one would have to visit places which Pan Am and its competitors did not service. These guys had come back from another planet. So much for picking up a few shares of the company that made the reader. . . . How had they gotten off Earth in the first place? I gave a nervous laugh. "The old hometown doesn't compare with the big cities, huh?"

Startled, he coughed. "Surely you don't think I'm a *native*, do you?"

I scrutinized his ringlets, his wide-set eyes, his well-tanned skin. "You look as human as anybody I know. Are you saying you're not?"

"I was born a billion light years from here — perhaps two billion."

"But —" I gestured vaguely, first to myself, then to him. "I — we, anybody who's ever thought about it — figured that, uh, extraterrestrials would look —" the phrase *like bug-eyed monsters* sprang unbidden to mind "— different. I mean, with a different evolutionary history and all —"

"Oh, that." He waved a hand dismissively. "My ancestors were born here. Many thousands of years ago, of course. The Br'tzen, you know."

I shook my head. "Burrahtsen?"

"Slavers and understock breeders. Quite successful, till the Shuffle put paid to *that*. But enough. You people aren't supposed to know we even exist, much less —" It was his turn to make the vague gesture.

My heart sort of stopped. An icewave pulsed through my entire body. "You're not going to — to kill me to keep me quiet, are you?"

He drew back and stared at me. "The Rules of War —" his offended tone capitalized the words with stress "— prohibit killing civilians."

My heart decided to kick back in. "Well. That's — good to hear."

"Hmm." He eyed me speculatively.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, we do rather have to prevent you from babbling about marooned alien soldiers until we leave."

"Marooned? Are you stranded?"

"Good God, no! The techs have spares in their packs. Once they've repaired the porter, we'll be on our way. At most it will take a hundred tchzee's — ah, sorry." Again he tilted his head, a faraway look in his eyes. "A baker's dozen of your hours, yes, at maximum. And all non-indigenous artifacts shall go with us. But until then —"

"Captain, I have to make some phone calls. I won't say a word about you, but I have to find out about an armoire and an explosion, and maybe send some sell orders to the broker. You can listen in, I'll let you hold the phone if you want, but —"

"Impossible. News of our presence —"

From outside came a rumble so close to the subsonic that I felt it as much as heard it. Like a full blast of bass at a rock concert, it rolled through my chest and rattled my ribs. Slowly it rose in pitch to the roar of a jet engine, and more quickly to a disaster siren's keening. It held briefly at the whine that a million-pound mosquito would make, then vanished into the ultrasonic.

I uncovered my ears. "That's one way to stay anonymous."

"Well, of course, we —" He caught himself. "You were being sarcastic."

"Uh-huh."

"Ah. That was the sound of a . . ." His forehead crinkled in thought. "A camouflage dome, is probably the best translation. Anyone passing by — or overhead — will see only the valley as it was when the dome rose, minus us, of course. Nor will they hear anything out of the ordinary."

"And you sent your men out to the perimeter to make sure no one comes in to see any different?"

He laughed. "No. They're digging in to repel the attack."

I closed my eyes. Took a deep breath. Opened the eyes again. "Did you say 'attack'?"

"Yes. In a very short time a Rylce!ng company will port through and attempt to wipe us out." He frowned. "Which will pose a bit of a problem, as I can hardly use the card here."

"Rillseeglucking company? Card? I don't understand a word you're saying!"

"Of course you don't. And it doesn't matter, really. Ah . . . gold!"

"What?"

"Gold — a soft, shiny yellow metal? You do attach economic value to it, do you not?"

"Three oh six and an eighth an ounce and rising, as of yesterday."

"Well. That will simplify matters."

Head in hands, I mumbled through my fingers. "Could we go back to the beginning, please?"

He patted my shoulder. "It's very simple, really. We raided Rylcel and kidnapped four of their . . . call them defective experts. Your language — ah, English — has neither the word nor the concept for what they really are."

"Those four dead birds out back?"

"Birds? Ah. Yes."

"So those are Rillseeglucking, huh?"

"No, no, those are Pexaznks. They . . . never mind, you lack those words, too."

"I thought you said you didn't kill civilians."

"No, they died because they had turned their shields off. When the porter took the direct hit — never mind. If anyone killed them, the Rylcelng did; they know better than anybody how claustrophobic a shielded Pexaznk becomes."

"Okay. So. You raided, you kidnapped, some circuits fried, and you wound up here."

"Fried? Ah, yes. And because this is not Base Roqir, with its mega-eighties and triplex poly-screens, the Rylcelng will pursue us."

"How do they know where you went?"

"They'll use a tracker, of course." He touched a brown, oblong carrying case at his belt. "It reads the wavefront thrown off by a porter and translates it back into coordinates."

"I see." Not that I did, but if he talked long enough, maybe things would start to make sense. "They know you're off your well-defended Rocker Base, so they'll come after you."

"Precisely."

"Don't they know that you know that they're on their way?"

"Of course they do."

"So they know they're going to walk into an ambush."

He nodded, clearly puzzled at my restatement of the obvious.

"Why are they going to do it? Is it some form of ritual suicide?"

Enlightenment came; he beamed. "Two things, actually. First, they don't know we've been issued second-generation shields. And second, they're invisible." He cocked his head. "Well, not truly invisible, but very nearly. Gaseous life forms, you know, and they move like the very Dickens. They'll be expecting to mop us up in a tchzzee — ah, call it ten minutes."

"Gaseous life forms are going to attack? With what? Bad breath?"

"No, no. They directly manipulate the planet's magnetic field — on a localized scale, of course. More than powerful enough to rip every molecule of iron out of the target, I assure you."

The pallor of the corpses explained at last. No hemoglobin left. God, what a horrible way to die. "Weren't your men wearing their shields?"

"Yes." A shadow crossed his face. "But even they have their limits. They can withstand a maximum of three simultaneous strikes, no more. And they overload if they've insufficient time to refresh themselves between hits. The

builders claim they can take ten zaps a tchzzee." He shook his head. "They fail after eight."

"Uh-huh . . ."

"Now before they arrive we'll get you a shield and a gun —"

"Aw, come on, you use guns on gas?"

"I assure you, it's not a projectile weapon." He looked amused. "You really have no need to know its workings; suffice it to say that it pumps energy into the Rylce!ng. If you can hold the gun on them long enough —"

"How long?"

"Ah . . ." He squinted at the ceiling. "A minute — no, a second — one sixtieth of one sixtieth of one hour, yes?"

"Ah . . ." I had to squint at the ceiling, too. "Yes."

"Burn a Rylce!ng for a full second, and you'll burst it."

"Poof!"

"Oh, rather more than poof, I assure you. But you'll see. Speaking of which, do wear your dark goggles — and your breather, too. If they get close enough, they will attempt to invade your airways."

My stomach knotted hard at the thought of an alien flowing down my throat into my lungs. Sweat broke cold on my forehead.

Mirai spoke a few words to the soldier, who left through the back door.

"Captain, about those calls I have to make —"

"I am sorry." He seemed sincere, but implacable. "Standing orders. I'd be dis-enhanced back to private if I let you."

So I was going to argue with him and his entire squad? The calls would have to wait.

The other soldier returned with an armload of gear. Mirai sketched a salute and left.

"Your goggles." He handed them to me. "You'll know how to wear them. You can call me Corporal Vunour."

"So now you speak English, too."

"He told me the setting." He shrugged. "Your breather." He set a pair of earmuffs on the table.

I picked them up. "This is a joke, right?"

Vunour shook his head. "Wrong. It sets up a field around your head; bars low-speed particles larger than, ah, two microns? and randomizes the organization of incoming gases. The Rylce!ng hate running into them. Trust us."

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

"None at all." He smiled. "Your shield. It's already active. Just clip it to your belt."

The small black box weighed perhaps two ounces. "It's on? I don't feel anything."

"You won't."

"But I thought the Pex — the birds out there — felt claustrophobic in

them."

"They do. The anti-magnetism disturbs their navigational glands."

"That certainly clarifies things."

"Keep an eye on it during the battle. It turns yellow two hits before overload."

I glanced down at it. "So if I see it change color?"

"I suggest prayer." He sighed, and held out a gun. "Fully charged, hundred-thousand-round capacity, lay your finger alongside the barrel, point with your finger, and press hard on the pressure plate. It's recoilless, and the beam's invisible. You'll probably be more dangerous to us than to them, but the Captain said to give it to you anyway."

Sudden sweat slicked my palms. "I thought I was a civilian."

"To us, you're a civilian. To the Rylcelng, you're one of us."

"Wonderful. . . ."

He asked for a glass of water, and then we went out to sit on the patio. I got to chew my knuckles for at least five minutes before a horn blared by the stable. Vunour jumped to his feet.

So did I. "What is it?"

"They're here." He glanced over at me. "Now listen. It's my job to keep you alive. Do what I tell you. And for God's sake, don't get in my way."

"Right." I tugged my goggles over my eyes, and clamped the breather to my ears. "Where are they?"

He pointed to the old stable where I parked the BMW. "There."

"I don't see 'em."

He made a sound of disgust. "That big shimmer by the window?"

A patch of air maybe a couple feet high and twice as long waved visibly. "I thought it was heat."

"Uh-uh." He lifted his gun, but the quiver zigzagged away so quickly the eye could not follow it.

Something distorted my vision. Blinking to clear it, I shook my head.

"Bloody fool, it's wrapped around your breather field!"

"Oh." I held the gun a few inches before my nose, barrel pointing straight up, and squeezed the pressure plate.

A wink of green and the distortion disappeared.

"I got it!"

"Wrong." He was pivoting, swinging his gun as he moved, tracking a darting, dwindling emerald cloud that —

That burst into a ball of green flame fifteen feet in diameter. The roar of the explosion rattled the back windows and left me slightly deafened.

"That's what you see when you get them."

A wisp of smoke curled up from the scorched grass. "What would have happened," I said, careful to keep my voice steady, "if I had killed it when it was wrapped around me?"

He gestured to my jeans and sweatshirt. "They fireproof?"

"Uh-uh."

"Well, then." He looked around. "They've switched tactics. Usually they just pour through and attempt to overwhelm us. I wonder if they've guessed about the sh—"

The air by the stable rippled from ground level to well above the roofline. It seemed a single, solid mass, not a collection of individuals. I pointed the gun at its approximate middle and fired.

Pale flickers showed here and there, like heat lightning on the horizon, only an awful lot closer. They shot away from the stable, twisting, turning, fading as they moved at cheetah-like speed.

"Jesus, they're fast."

"Wait till they adjust to the environment. Then you'll see fast."

The world disappeared. Vunour and I stood inside a reddish brown eggshell.

"What the hell?"

"That table my glass was on — was it iron?"

"Wrought iron, yes."

He nodded, and pointed to the eggshell. "That's what's left of it."

"Good God!"

"Uh-huh. That's where all the iron in your body'd be if you weren't wearing your shield."

I checked the box. Still black. "But there isn't even the slightest pull on the gun."

"Aluminum."

"Oh."

"Give it an hour, it'll die down."

"An hour?"

"Ah . . ." He closed his eyes. "Sorry, a second. Or is it a minute? A short time, at any rate. They can't hold it for long."

Indeed, a few seconds later the eggshell melted out of the air to leave a rusty ring on the patio.

And the air shimmered all around us.

I fired at random.

A thousand splashes of glowing colors jittered insanely over the yard. Confusing, at first, but then it made sense: The weapon poured energy into the gaseous Rylce!ng, energy absorbed by the molecules of their bodies. Excited electrons made quantum leaps to higher states — then fell back, each throwing off one photon, like a fluorescent light.

"Aim at bright spots," said Vunour. "Keep them lit up. I don't expect you to get them, but make it easier for the rest of us."

Writhing rainbows surged up to me, wrapped themselves around me. I held the pressure plate down, wishing I could tell where one gasbag left off and another began so I could concentrate my fire.

A blast hurled me onto my butt.

The air cleared immediately.

Slapping my smoldering pants leg, I said, "How many are in a company?"

"Theirs? About two hundred."

"And we've only gotten two of 'em?"

"Some days it goes quicker than others."

As if to prove his point, half a dozen went off simultaneously on the east slope. A four-foot pine ignited like a torch. "Shit, that was for next Christmas."

"Keep firing!"

Rushing adrenaline damped my fear and steadied my hand. I began to get a feel for it. The Rylce!ng zoomed along four or five feet above the ground, cutting back and forth. When winged, though, they seemed always to stop and turn around. I tried to fire during that half-second when they hung in the air like St. Elmo's fire.

I stung one by the stable, anticipated its line of flight, zinged it just as it began to move, then nailed it when it stopped. It roared into flame. "Hah!"

A hundred feet away, a soldier leaped up from the tangle of forsythia that grew above the retaining wall. Just long enough for the yellow of his shield control to show, he hovered spread-eagled a yard off the ground — then disappeared inside a misty globe. He died silently, invisibly. By the time the sphere of hemoglobin dissipated, he lay sprawled atop the wall, his face and arms chalk white.

I felt sick. "Vunour, what's their range?"

"Seventy — uh, uh, twice your height, okay?"

Thirteen feet. Call it fifteen to be safe. So —

Two huge blue clouds lunged at me. Pressing hard on the plate, I swung the barrel wildly, aiming to slice through their mid-sections again and again and —

Wrought iron hazed the air around me, trembled, and fell back.

I looked over — "Jesus, Vunour, your box is yellow!"

"Keep them away from me!"

Not an easy task. As if sensing his vulnerability, they arrowed toward him, sharks homing in on a bleeding swimmer.

No time to think. Go for the glow. Nearest first, light it up, bounce it back toward the stable, get the next.

So that was why Captain Mirai had circled the area with his men. To attack, the Rylce!ng had to rush outward. Wounded, they rebounded toward the center, and clumped there. A beam aimed in their midst would almost certainly hit at least one of them.

It occurred to me that a beam that *missed* them would surely hit one of us. Not a nice thought.

Sweat ran down my face. The rust cloud rose up around me again. Ten or twenty giant fluorescences arrowed at Vunour. I got the leader, zapped the

second as the first braked, beamed the third in line as the first lurched toward the stable —

The nearest stopped again. Another soldier had tagged it.

I could not let it get closer. I goosed it.

The whole pack brightened as it drew fire from all parts of the valley. Vunour and I kept sending them back toward the center; the other marksmen drove them right back at us.

Desperate, now, I whipped the beam back and forth through the crowd, hitting five or ten on each pass. My shoulder ached; my mouth dried till my tongue felt like leather.

Vunour's box dangled on his belt as yellow as a daffodil.

Across the way, a soldier stood — tracked — and fired.

The beam splashed across my face, inciting phosphenes to riot.

I yelled, and jumped to one side. Vunour took the situation in with a glance. "The frequency is keyed to them, not us. Don't worry."

"Now you tell me."

The aliens closed in on us little by little. Twenty feet, then eighteen, then sixteen —

Then all of them exploded at once.

A fury of fire and sound slammed into me, hurling me backwards, tumbling me through two reverse somersaults.

Groggy, I sat up and blinked. Blinked again. Screamed: "I can't see!" Then screamed once more: "And I'm on fire!"

"Easy!" Rough hands slapped my torso, my upper arms. "It's not bad, skin's red but not charred. Easy, it's out."

"Vunour, I can't see!"

"It'll wear off." He grabbed my shoulders and turned me forty-five degrees. "Sit here, point your gun straight ahead, and spray the area in front of you." He sprang to his feet and moved off to my left. "I'll keep you covered, but remember where I am. No sense wasting your shots."

I sat on the cool concrete of the patio, blind and scared out of my mind. Had my shield gone yellow yet? How close were they? Could Vunour fend them off till my vision returned?

And, come to think of it, just how long would a hundred thousand rounds last if you never took your finger off the pressure plate?

For the better part of forty-five minutes my ears rang incessantly. Every time the clangor seemed likely to fade, another Rylce!ng blew up and set all those bells to ringing once again.

Most exploded much too close for comfort.

I had no idea how Mirai's men were faring: They fought in silence, with only the occasional muttered "Keep it up" from Vunour to let me know anyone besides myself still survived.

Panting, heart pounding, I sat and swung the gun through one tight figure eight after another, and listened to Rylce!ng die.

Those forty-five minutes lasted a century.

"Okay!" Strong hands took the gun away from me. Someone helped me to my feet and lifted the breather off my head. The mingled stinks of smoke and sweat filled my nostrils. "It appears to be over," Mirai said.

"I can't see." I staggered as the hands released me. Keeping your balance is surprisingly difficult when you have just lost your sight.

The captain roared two syllables in his own tongue.

Someone ran up to me with fast heavy steps. Cold metal pressed against the nape of my neck.

I froze. "Jesus, don't shoot me!"

Mirai chuckled. "How's your vision now?"

"Uh —" I blinked, and looked him right in the eye. "My God, it's back!"

And then I saw my yard.

Or what was left of it.

Ash covered the ground. Blackened tree trunks held leafless, charred branches to the sky. Soot painted the rear of the house. Flames danced in the ruin of the stable. A pillar of oily smoke towered above the twisted wreckage of my '82 BMW.

I sat down again. "Holy shit."

He shrugged. "Yes, well, there is a spot of damage, but —"

Vunour came up. Perhaps out of deference to me, perhaps because a mere corporal only had active storage room in his head for one language at a time, he spoke in English. "Captain, two hundred came through."

Mirai nodded. "They always send a full company."

"Battle analysis shows one ninety-seven dead."

"Have you swept the area?"

Regret in his eyes, Vunour said, "They're in the house."

"You know what to do."

"Yes, sir." He threw a salute, pivoted, and bawled out orders.

Rising, I grabbed Mirai's arm. "What's he doing? What's going to happen to my house?"

With a twitch of his biceps, the captain broke my grip. "Watch."

I did. Filled with foreboding all the while.

As precisely as a good team running through a play, twenty soldiers gathered, pulled gadgets and widgets and little black boxes from their packs, them slapped the assorted pieces into one big assembly. Vunour nodded, and pressed a button on its casing.

Ninety seconds later the house shivered. Glass flew out of window frames and sparkled in the sun. Slowly the chimney leaned over — then roared down the roof in an angry red brickfall, tearing shingles and gutters and fascia board with it. "Hey, no! Hey, that's my house! What —"

Mirai held me back with one hand.

The foundations *bulged*.

Three explosions sounded within, blam! blam! blam!

The house caught fire immediately. And collapsed.

QB Equity Management had just reached the top of the creek. Bad enough I might have stayed with a company while its stock gurgled down the drain. To have to go to those six chief financial officers and ask their assistance in reconstructing the records of their devalued portfolios would be professional suicide. What could I say? "Naturally, I stored backup disks and tapes in a fireproof safe, but the Rylce!ng manipulate magnetic fields, see, and when they attacked . . ." Oh, yeah. Sure. Would you trust your pension funds to the guy who told you *that* story?

"Right," said Mirai. "That's it, then. We'll be going now."

"You'll *what*? You've *ruined* me!"

He snapped his fingers. "Of course." He pulled a card from his pocket and stared at it. "What is the extent of your damages?"

I could not believe him. "What?"

"To begin with, what was the purchase price of this property?"

"Sixty-seven five, but by now it's got to be worth at least seventy-five."

"Dollars?"

"*Thousands* of dollars!"

"Ah. Yes, I rather thought I'd misinterpreted you. Unfortunately, we cannot allow for appreciation." He tapped the card several times. "And the vehicle in the garage?"

No appreciation? "Forty thousand."

His cool dark eyes looked up into mine. "For shame. Would you care to try again?"

"What, is that a lie detector, too?"

He nodded.

"Twenty thousand."

Tap-tap. "Contents of the house?"

At least he was accepting the original price without demanding an allowance for depreciation. "A couple thou for furniture." I sighed. "Twelve thousand four hundred eighteen dollars worth of antiques in inventory, at cost. Five, maybe six thousand dollars for computer hardware, software, and accessories. And, of course, my business. . . ." I choked back a sob. My God, all those hours of typing to get the damn data into the system, wiped away in a minute. "At least two thousand dollars just to reenter all the information. And I might have lost all my clients, I don't know yet. That depends on who owned the plant that self-destructed this morning."

Mirai shook his head. "We cannot allow for lost profits, either."

"Oh, great."

"I do not write the regulations." He handed the card to Vunour. "I make that one hundred nine thousand, nine hundred eighteen dollars. Call it an even one hundred and ten. See to it, will you, Corporal?"

Vunour took the card and nodded. "I'll be right back." He walked to the smouldering wreckage of the stable, rounded the corner, and disappeared.

"Where the Hell is he going? You guys have razed my house, my stable, my car, and he vanishes! Where—"

Mirai's scowl cut me off. "The corporal said he would be right back. Depend on it."

So I stood on the sidelines while Mirai lined up his troops. They did strange things with stranger devices. Every once in a while one would break ranks and dart into the barbeque pit that had once been woods, to return with something or other clutched tight in a gloved hand. Twice a man came back towing a corpse through the air; he set them beside the original seven, and tucked the dead men's rifles into their arms.

Five minutes later Vunour appeared out of nowhere. He carried a small paper bag with handles. "They're all yours." He opened the bag.

Thirty gold bars gleamed up at me.

My jaw dropped.

"Thirty troy pounds on the nose," said Vunour. "One hundred ten thousand dollars for the damage, and a few more for the inconvenience." He looked over to Mirai. "I see we're ready to go." He held out his hand. "I appreciate what you did there. For a civilian, you're pretty good. But — nothing personal — I hope we never meet again."

"Yeah." Strangely numb, I shook his hand. "Yeah, me too. . . ."

As Vunour walked away, Mirai barked out commands. Nine soldiers levitated the corpses and towed them around the smoking corner of the stable. I hesitated a moment, then ran up to the Captain. "Hey, Mirai!"

He pivoted stiffly. "You've been paid in full. I'd advise against extortion."

"Huh? Oh, no, no." I waved off the accusation. "I just have to ask, is this going to happen again? I mean, if there's war going on —"

"Good heavens, man, we're not at war with the Rylce!ng."

"But — but you raided their planet, kidnapped four of their experts —"

"Did I say 'experts'? I mean 'exports,' of course — although I suppose one could call them expert, as well." He patted me on the shoulder. "We really must be going now."

"Now that you've cleared everything up, why not?" I trailed along behind him.

The soldiers fell into formation outside the north wall of the stable. Mirai looked them over, motioned me to step back, then nodded to Vunour.

The corporal pressed a button on his belt. A great high whine dropped out of the ultrasonic, dopplered down to a bass rumble, and vanished. With a wink for me, the corporal pressed another button. The whole group disappeared.

I stood in the waste of my domain. I lifted my eyes and my voice to the sky. "Would somebody please tell me just what the Hell went on here?"

The sky did not answer.

So I retrieved the gold. I lifted the bag — hefted it thoughtfully — then set it back down. A flimsy paper sack held thirty pounds without ripping?

Impossible. It was thinner than onionskin, damn near translucent.

I dumped the thirty bars on the scorched soil, put my foot in the bag, grabbed the handles, and yanked. The handles cut deep into my palms; my lower back twinged ominously.

"It's not paper," I whispered to myself.

It was, maybe, a few million dollars after a good lab analyzed it. . . .

I had almost reached the house when tin cans rattled.

"Oh, God, did they come back for it?" I raced to the far side of the stable.

No soldiers. Just a twenty-pound raccoon, peering at me from the inside of an overturned trash can.

Giddy with relief, I giggled. "Help yourself," I told him. "I've already got mine."



BEHIND MAGIC; BEHIND THAT

The key to magic is misdirection.

When the right hand

moves,

Watch the left. If both hands

move at once

maybe something else is going on.

Maybe. The thing is,

you can't ever be certain.

There is no key to misdirection, and to look too deeply is

maybe to lose something; maybe

to gain too much:

The world pared down to

a skeleton of words

precise motion

a glance with eyes that see.

The essentials only.

You could lose yourself in these.

— Thomas Kearney

Behind Magic; Behind That 117

THE MAN WHO CURED CANCER

by Carol Deppe

art: George Barr



Dr. Deppe (biology, Harvard — specializing in genetic control mechanisms) may not have come to SF writing in the usual way, Clarion and all that. But she does know how science is done. As witness the present story.

Her first, "Everybody Draws Lines," was in our January 1986 issue.

Once upon a time, people got lumbago and dropsy and ague and quinsy and biliousness and consumption and wasting and lumps and bumps and splotches and tumors and cysts. They got scrofula and edema and catarrh and coryza and chlorosis and costiveness and La Grippe. They got "summer complaint." And though they didn't mention it, they probably got winter complaint and spring complaint and fall complaint too.

Sometimes the people got better, and sometimes they died. It was just one of those things.

Then people suddenly didn't get lumbago or biliousness or wasting or lumps or bumps or splotches or tumors or cysts.

Instead, they got cancer. And cancer was terrifying.

John James Cramer was terrified of cancer. His mother had died of cancer and his father had died of cancer; and one of his older brothers had gone crazy thinking he was dying of cancer when he was perfectly OK and his sister had got an ulcer from worrying that she *might* get cancer.

John James was a nervous wiry guy with a quick smile and yellow teeth — up until they took away his cigarettes.

Every day he went into the laboratory and gave cancer to rats. Sometimes they lived and usually they died. He missed his cigarettes.

He missed the cigarettes, but he just drank ever so many more cups of coffee and got more and more nervous and worked harder and harder giving cancer to rats and watching them die.

Then they took away his coffee. "Caffeine," the reports said, "has been shown to cause cancer in laboratory animals."

John James really missed his coffee. He became lots less nervous . . . somewhat lethargic in fact . . . and started gaining weight.

And John James knew that being overweight correlated with all sorts of nasty things. So he started drinking diet soda pop, and slimmed back down, and went on giving cancer to rats.

He tested various substances to see if they would prevent cancer in rats, and they never did. He tested various substances to see if they would *cause* cancer in rats, and they *always* did. It was depressing.

Then they took away his diet soda. "Cyclamates," the studies said, "have been shown to cause cancer in laboratory rats."

John James sighed. He'd seen it coming. This time he was ready. He'd developed a lust for fine imported beer.

From then on John James drank nothing but beer. The beer tasted wonderful, but it made him depressed. And watching rats die of cancer made him depressed. So mostly he just stayed at home and sat in his favorite easy chair and drank beer and gained weight.

Then they took away his beer. "Beer," they said, "is made with malt. Malt is charred organic matter. Charring organic matter produces nitrosamines." And, "Nitrosamines are known to cause cancer in laboratory animals," they said.

That was the final straw.

John James had *had* it. He decided it was time to Do Something.

John James ate nothing at all. He drank nothing except water. He paced up and down in his laboratory, thinking and thinking, and growing skinnier and skinnier.

There are only two kinds of substances in this world, John James thought. There are the substances that have been shown to cause cancer in laboratory rats, and there are the substances that have not yet been shown to cause cancer in laboratory rats because no one's looked, but will be when they do.

He paced up and down and drank more water and thought more and more.

We need a whole different approach, he thought. We need a whole different way of looking at the problem. We need . . .

Sometimes John James felt he was right on the edge of seeing what was needed, but it was just a little out of reach. . . .

So he thought harder and harder and paced more and more. And he drank nothing but water and ate nothing at all and got skinnier and skinnier.

Until one night he collapsed into bed in total exhaustion . . . and then . . . suddenly . . . in the middle of the night . . . he woke up and . . . he *knew the answer*. He knew what needed to be done.

John James got up and ate a meager breakfast and drank a glass of water. Then he began to make his plans.

The conference room was still empty when John James entered and began his preparations. On a table to the left of the podium he placed a black-cloth shrouded box. In the box was the result of thirteen years of work. Thirteen years of 14-hour days, of 7-day weeks, of 365-day years . . . hard lonely work.

He placed the second covered box beside the first and stood back and looked. He ran his hand through his hair . . . hair that was grey now. . . . John James was no longer young.

Trembling a little, he set up the projector in back. He ran a control wire from the projector to the podium in front so he could change the slides himself. For the umpteenth time, he checked the order of his slides. For the umpteenth time, he reviewed his lecture notes.

He wished he were a better lecturer.

People began to file in and sit down. There were reporters and government agency representatives. There were tobacco-company people and brewing-company representatives and drug manufacturers. There were consumer-group advocates.

John James sat in a chair in the front row and watched them come. He was trembling more and more. He'd worked so hard these last years . . . he was unused to groups of people any more. And so much depended on this one presentation. It was his entire life's work that would be accepted or rejected here today.

The time arrived. John James stood and took his place behind the podium, lecture notes gripped in a sweaty hand. He felt himself begin to panic. . . . He looked out at the audience and . . .

Good grief! he thought. *Even the tobacco-company people have white teeth!*

Suddenly it was OK. These people were people just like him. They were terrified of cancer, just like him. *They'd* had their cigarettes and coffee and beer taken away from them, just like him.

John James relaxed. He laid his notes aside. He sat down on the table and began to talk. He didn't give the lecture that he'd written out. He just talked.

He started at the beginning. He told them about his mother and father dying of cancer. He told them about his brother and sister being so afraid of cancer that one went crazy and the other made herself sick. He told about going in to the laboratory every day and giving cancer to rats and watching them die.

He told about how they'd taken away his cigarettes and his coffee and his diet soda and his beer.

People started nodding. They were with him.

"Bacon," whispered one of the reporters. "They took away my bacon."

"Steaks," said someone else. "My charcoal-broiled steaks. They got those too."

Everyone was nodding and muttering now.

"They got my whole breakfast," said a consumer advocate. "First they got the coffee, but that wasn't enough for them. They came back later and took the toast."

An angry buzz filled the room as each person remembered what he'd lost.

John James waited. Finally his audience grew calm again. They looked at him hopefully.

"I worked for years," John James continued. "I tested substance after substance to see if anything would prevent cancer in laboratory rats, and nothing ever did. I tested substance after substance to see whether they would cause cancer in laboratory rats, and they *always* did. No matter what I did, the rats got cancer.

"And when I realized that, that's when I got my Idea. I woke up in the middle of the night one night with this Idea . . ."

There was an expectant hush. Everybody knew that an Idea In The Middle Of The Night is the real thing.

"The problem," John James said, "is that *everything* causes cancer in laboratory rats."

John James paused a moment. Then he raised his voice into a shout. "What the world needs is tougher rats!"

He reached for the covered shape on the table. With a flourish, he swept the black cloth aside and revealed . . . a cage . . . a common laboratory cage.

In the cage was a small brown animal.

"Ladies and gentlemen," John James said softly . . . "I present to you . . . the Cramer laboratory rat."

The audience stared at the rat in complete silence.

The rat stared back at the audience with beady black, healthy-looking eyes.

John James flipped the switches that turned off the lights and turned on the projector.

"It took me eleven years to develop and refine the Cramer laboratory rat," he said. "It took me two additional years of tests to see what it could do. I'd like to present you with some of the results of those tests."

The first slide appeared.

"This slide shows results of experiments on the effect of nitrosamines on the incidence of cancer in the Cramer laboratory rat. Over here . . ." he indicated with the pointer, "are rats fed a diet of plain rat chow. Over here . . . are rats fed rat chow with massive amounts of nitrosamines. . ."

John James waited.

"Nitrosamines *don't* cause cancer in the Cramer laboratory rat . . ." a reporter concluded thoughtfully.

The asbestos-mining-company man was the first to realize the full implications of the work.

"Nitrosamines do *not* cause cancer in laboratory animals," he announced explosively.

There was a stunned silence.

John James changed the slide.

"This slide summarizes experiments on the effect of cyclamates on the incidence of cancer in the Cramer laboratory rat. . . ." John James said.

"Cyclamates do *not* cause cancer in laboratory rats!" concluded the asbestos-mining-company man happily.

A soft murmur filled the room as everybody started to understand.

John James changed the slide.

"Here's a picture of the design of my smoking machine," he said. "Cigarettes are loaded into this chamber, and they roll down here and are lit automatically. Then air comes in here, passes over the burning cigarette, and goes through this air intake line to these special, airtight rat cages.

"I kept rats in these cages, breathing smoke-filled air twenty-four hours a day, every day for an entire year."

He changed the slide.

"This slide shows the incidence of lung cancer in these chain-smoking rats . . . as compared with nonsmoking controls. . . ."

"Hurrah!" shouted one of the tobacco-company men. "Smoking does *not* cause lung cancer in laboratory animals!"

"Far out!" said one of the reporters, and he started clapping.

Suddenly everybody was clapping and cheering and stamping.

It was a while before the room was quiet again.

"Finally," said John James, "I fed a rat . . . this very rat you see here . . . ten birth-control pills a day for the entire last year. And it did *not* get cancer," he said. "And it did *not* get hypertension. And it did *not* get heart disease. And it didn't get pregnant, either."

"Hurrah!" said the birth-control-pill manufacturer. "Birth-control pills are completely safe and 100% effective in laboratory animals."

"Huzzah huzzah!" said the tobacco-company man.

"Isn't that a male rat?" asked the consumer-group advocate.

"Hush!" said the birth-control-pill manufacturer.

"Throw that spoilsport out!" said the asbestos-mining-company man.

And they did.

Then John James lifted the other black cloth, and there, revealed on the table, were ten cartons of generic cigarettes and a cooler full of diet soda and generic beer.

So everybody lit cigarettes and bummed cigarettes from each other and gave each other lights just like in the old days. And when their throats got raspy and dry they quaffed diet soda and beer.

It was a great day.

Then the reporters rushed off to call in the news. And the birth-control-pill manufacturer rushed home to rewrite his ad slicks. And the asbestos-mining-company man rushed off to call the lawyer who was handling their cases in court. And the tobacco-company people all rushed out to look for the Surgeon General.

After that, everybody in the country ate and drank and smoked exactly what they wanted to eat and drink and smoke, and everybody was happy.

People went back to getting lumbago and biliousness and wasting and lumps and bumps and splotches and tumors and cysts.

But a great weight was lifted from the shoulders of mankind. Because nobody ever got cancer any more.



BAD COMPANY

A cultist, entranced with Cthulhu
encountered a slaving ghoulish who
said, "Old Ones don't need me.

They won't even feed me,
and so in a pinch I guess you'll do."

— Darrell Schweitzer

Screen Reviews

by Baird Searles

Yearlong Longyear

As everybody probably knows, the movie *Enemy Mine* is from a story by Barry Longyear. As everybody probably also knows, it's the situation of the single individuals from the two different sides of a war shipwrecked on the same desert island — er, planet — and learning to live together. Toshiro Mifune and Lee Marvin did it in World War II, if you remember. It's a perfect situation for science-fictional treatment, and Mr. Longyear probably did a good job. I say probably because I haven't read the original story, which is just as well. If you've read the material from which a film is made, you willy or nilly come with preconceived ideas or, without even knowing it, you may fill in information which the film may not supply. In short, you are unable to view the movie as a movie.

The movie *Enemy Mine* is essentially a two-character drama for all but about five minutes at the beginning and twenty minutes at the end. Interstellar-traveling humanity, at the close of the twenty-first century, has run into the "Dracs," a reptilian, humanoid race; and war has resulted. Fighter pilot Willy Davidge, working out of a station in deep space, has followed a Drac ship close to an uninhabited planet; both crash land near each other. Davidge is the only survivor of his ship; he scouts the wreckage of the Drac ship and sees that only one of its crew has survived. Davidge is captured by the Drac and for a while is used as slave labor; but as survival gets

tougher on the barren planet and their communication grows, they become friends and allies.

Admittedly, one of the two characters changes in mid-stream — Jerry, as Davidge calls the alien, becomes pregnant; the race is physically bisexual and pregnancy just seems to sort of happen like spontaneous combustion. (This is one thing that never happened to Toshiro Mifune.) (S)he dies giving birth, and Davidge rears the child, which develops rapidly and is virtually a miniature adult in a couple of years.

Nevertheless, for all intents and purposes the movie is for most of its length a two-character show — which, as all students of dramaturgy know, is a very tricky thing to pull off. Dialogue and characters have to be sharply and intelligently written and delineated, or boredom sets in rapidly and the thing will seem to go on for years. In this case, let's say it goes on for months, because there are any number of things that aren't explained. We don't know why the Drac doesn't kill Davidge immediately; the human's first impulse is to kill before he is captured. Are all the Dracs just nice guys? If so, why are we fighting them? The changes in the attitudes of the human and the alien just sort of happen; it's only *after* they get chummy that they start comparing notes and see the feelings that they have in common. And the baby alien is sort of pulled out of a hat (as it were) to reinforce our positive feelings about the Dracs; we're supposed to go all

goosey and E. T.-ish over it.

Lord knows, the final segment of the movie does try to make up for all the slowness that's gone before. Renegade miners who have a mining outpost on the planet and who use Drac slaves capture the Dracling; at the same time, Davidge is rescued by his comrades. It all ends with Davidge mounting a one-man rescue expedition. He and the baby are in an ore car heading for the furnace; the Drac slaves are rising; the chief meanie-miner is manipulating the ore car and laughing maniacally; the Space Patrol is zooming in to the rescue. What a stew!

The production isn't all that hot either; the space battle sequences are pretty familiar at this point, and the alien landscapes — yellow skies and several moons, one of them huge — aren't any too convincing. And the Dracs come across as actors in rubber suits — there's an unfortunate resemblance to that critter from the black lagoon. (Lou Gosset Jr., as Jerry, certainly gives the old college try, though, in probably the most outré starring role the movies have yet seen. I can just hear his agent — "Hi, Lou. How'd you like to play a pregnant reptilian alien?")

Probably what makes you feel less kindly about this movie than you might otherwise is the opportunity wasted. The basic outline is ideal for a really adult movie about human/alien relationships. Or if that's too much to ask, at least a detailed study of survival on an alien world.

But early on in the film, one of the chief menaces on the planet is established by showing us a giant crab-like creature falling into a pit dug deeply into the sand. As the creature scrabbles vainly to get out, a tentacle emerges from the bottom of the pit, grabs the creature, and pulls it beneath

the sand. After a moment, the empty shell is tossed violently over the edge of the pit, followed by a resounding **burp** on the sound track. There are those in this day and age that find burps funny, and those who don't. I guess this movie was intended for those who do.

Double Star

My eyebrow went up somewhere beyond my receding hairline last Christmastime when my trusty *TV Guide* informed me that one of the components of a *Twilight Zone* program was to be a dramatization of Arthur C. Clarke's short story, "The Star." For those of you who don't know this minor classic, it's told in the first person by a Jesuit scientist who has accompanied an exploratory expedition far into unknown space. A system is found which contains the remains of a great and beautiful civilization which was destroyed when the star went nova. After some calculation, the Jesuit ascertains that this was the "Star of the East" which heralded Christ's birth. The story ends: "Yet, oh God, there were so many stars you could have used. What was the need to give these people to the fire, that the symbol of their passing might shine above Bethlehem?"

Now there are those who regard the story as a startling study of a crisis in faith, and those who regard it as a piece of juvenile iconoclasm; whichever, it hardly seemed like network fare during the Christmas season. I tuned in; the estimable Fritz Weaver did a beautiful job as the scholarly Jesuit. He delivers the equivalent of the final line. The show doesn't end. Along comes somebody with a treacly poem from a cache of the vanished culture's artifacts. Translated, it goes something like "Don't mourn for us.

We had a good life and it's a beautiful universe. . . ."

Now this, of course, totally reverses the point of the story, making it a pietistic fable. What can one say? Nothing, I guess. I just wanted viewers to know that the story is something else, if they haven't read it.

Late Show Dept.

Every once in a while I come across old movies of interest on TV that have sunk into obscurity, and worse, haven't yet been released on video cassette. These are worth mentioning on the theory that even given the vagaries of film distribution on TV, they might show up in the wee hours of *your* screen if they did on mine.

Did you know that Twentieth Century-Fox set out to outshine *The Wizard of Oz* by starring Shirley Temple in a movie based on Maurice Maeterlinck's wondrous fantasy play, *The Blue Bird*? I finally saw it all the way through — on the first attempt I was carried kicking and screaming out of the theater (I was six). As it turns out, my critical instincts weren't all that bad even then. All the cutesy elements have been emphasized in the tale of the search of two children for the blue bird of happiness. Maeterlinck's play has astonishing stretches of darkness, particularly (no pun intended) in the Kingdom of (personified) Night. This has been cut from the movie, of course, and one is tempted to flee early on when Temple does one of her dear little songs.

Stick with it, though, if you're an aficionado of period visual fantasy. The scene laid in the Kingdom of the Future, where dwell the unborn of Earth, is an astonishing accomplishment in set and costume design. It's all white pillars and blue pools, with a horde of children in white tunics, a

Maxfield Parrish painting brought alive. Shirley more or less stays out of the action as the winged ship comes to bear those who are to be born across the void, and even some of the play's original poignancy comes through as two young lovers, fated never to meet on Earth, are torn from each other, and another who is destined to die violently for trying to bring peace on Earth walks bravely on board. The stickiness of the rest of the movie is worth putting up with for this sequence alone.

VIDEOWARES

Dinosaur! (New World Video). You'd think that something with the name of *Dinosaur!* made in 1960 would be a real stinker. And you'd be right. It's a combination comedy/thriller/monster/kid's movie that's just *awful* in every department from acting to effects. And yet, it's one of those inexplicable films that you'd never view by choice, but say, you fall into while tuning around the dial, and somehow get hooked. It's got an elusive (very elusive) charm to it, and a premise so off the wall that you sort of want to hang around and find out what happens.

On an unnamed tropical island, a construction crew unearths the perfectly preserved bodies of a tyrannosaur, a brontosaurus, and a cave man (no, not a Neandertal, or a Cro-Magnon; this is just a plain old garden variety generic cave man). Naturally (?), they all come to life. The island's inhabitants are terrorized — three times as much as they should be, since the brontosaurus is a pussy cat (a local kid is riding him in no time), and the cave man is just confused by modern living.

The tyrannosaur, however, is a problem, as most tyrannosaurs tend to be. Unfortunately, the local police

expended most of their energy chasing the other two (and are stopped, at one point, by pies in the face — I *told* you it was a comedy). The climax occurs when the naughty tyrannosaur attacks the brontosaur, who by now is practically the hero of the movie, and then meets a steam shovel in head-to-head combat.

It's certainly worth a night's rental when you're feeling like a silly evening of throwing popcorn about. However, don't get too raucous that you miss the best of several good jokes (in fact, one of the screen's funniest moments ever) when the cave man peers into the window of a house and finds himself staring into the face of a woman in cold cream and hair curlers staring out.

Ulysses (Warner). On the other hand, if you're of a classical bent, and want to see the screen version of one of literature's earliest fantastical voyages, there's *Ulysses*, made in 1956. It's a mixed bag indeed, covering some but not all of Ulysses' adventures.

The encounter with the one-eyed giant Cyclops, Polyphemus, is very nicely done — somehow just as you pictured it when you read the children's version of the *Odyssey*. The bypass of the Sirens is also evocative

and mysterious: they are never shown directly. And the court of Princess Nausicaa's father (where Ulysses tells most of the story as a flashback) is wonderfully Minoan, one of the few times in which that culture has ever been depicted on screen. (The lady's bosom, however, is chastely veiled.)

But, while the young Kirk Douglas is perfectly cast in the title role, there's the problem of Circe and Penelope, both played by the then current Italian sex bomb, Sylvana Mangano (presumably neither role was big enough for her, so she got both). Circe, swathed in veils and with green hair, wanders around in a cave with a lot of colored dry-icing smoke. Mangano was never a beauty (it's a profile to cut lumber with), but one wonders how she'd incurred the enmity of the costume designer and the hairdresser at the same time. One look at *this* Circe and you don't need your men turned into swine to run for it. You can't imagine why Ulysses hangs around as long as he does, until he gets back to Ithaca, and there's Sylvana again, looking even worse as a would-be matron than she did with green hair. But old dog Argus almost makes up for it by dropping dead on cue.



MRS. FRANKENSTEIN'S LAMENT

Sighed the wife of a scientist mad,
"The secret of life's to be had
from shambling great dolts
of dead flesh and bolts
and manners incurably bad!"

— Darrell Schweitzer



G. Barr



THE KING ACROSS THE MOUNTAINS
by Avram Davidson
art: George Barr

In case you are new to the scene (and we most cheerfully welcome new readers), the Triune Monarchy in this story occupies one of those interstices on the map such as also hold Ruritania and Graustark (its neighbors), Islandia, Lake Wobegon, and others — all, in sum, seeming to call for a third hemisphere.

The protagonist of these tales has figured in four stories in recent issues of this magazine and in others collected as The Enquiries of Doctor Eszterhazy (Warner Books, 1975).

A perilous moment at the puppet-theater. The audience — consisting mainly of the children of the poor, there by themselves, or those of the lower middle-class, accompanied by their country-girl nursemaids; of the meaner class of peasants, up to the city to hawk a wicker-basket-box of dubious eggs; and of super-annuated servants given a penny to spend by Young Master, or of the commonest of common laborers, smelling powerfully of the fish-market or the livery-stable — the audience at the puppet-theater are sitting at the edges of the benches, wondering if Little Handsome Hansli is going to be eaten up by The Ogre. Little Handsome Hansli is wondering, too.

“Who will save muh from being eaten by The Ogre?” he cries (or, at any rate, a voice from behind the backdrop understood to be his, cries) allowing his dangling legs to buckle and his dangling hands to be twitched aloft in prayer; “who will save muh, will nobodduh save muh, will someboddudh save muh, will anyboddudh save muh, and if so, who?” A good question. At this, the much bigger puppet, half-man and half-beast, chops its jaws to show its monstrous fangs and tushes, rubs its belly in the nummy-nummy sign, jumps up and down and makes menacing gestures and utters the famous gurgling-growling sound known world-wide* as “the chortle of The Ogre” — “WHO will save muh?” A thirteen-year-old baby-minder at this point beginning to whimper, her four-, five-, and six-year-old charges at once burst into loud wails. “Help! WHO?” cries out the Little Handsome Hansli puppet; whereat observe a not-overbright hostler’s helper starting to his feet and being tugged back down by his convives under some dim adumbration that this is really not allowed. And whilst Little Handsome Hansli’s despairing hoot of “Whoooo?” rings through every dirty ear and a few clean ones —

— see suddenly appearing from *Stage Right*, a puppet truly marvelously adorned, and crying out, “I will save you, Little Handsome Hansli!” *Much*

* World-wide throughout Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania, that is.

applause. This figure wears a tall, brimless hat of black samite, with a cross, rather like the archaic headgear of a Hyperborean Uniate mountain arch-priest, hat protruding up from a large and battered crown; its garments a mixture of inauthentic military and ecclesiastical rag-tags. "I will save you from filling the upper and lower intestines of The Ogre, for I am PURSER-JOHNNY, the Slayer of Frenchmen, Ogres, Monghoul, and Turks! — take *that*, The Ogre, you!, and *this*, and *this*, and —" Much, *much* applause. *Shouts*.

Shortly afterward, having quitted the puppet-theater, "We have really nothing quite like that in The Hague," said Dr. Philosof J.M.R. van der Clooster, Director of the Stateholders' Collegium in the Dutch capital.

"No. Uniquely a part of our own rich cultural heritage, if that is what one would correctly call it," said Dr. Engelbert Eszterhazy, of many degrees and titles, and of the City of Bella, capital of the Triple Monarchy of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania (fourth largest Empire in Europe [Russia, then Austria-Hungary, then Germany; the Turks, their European territories reduced largely to Albania, Thrace, and part of Macedonia, were fifth]). Doctor Philosof van der Clooster, on a trip around anyway the *Old World*, had stopped off briefly in Bella; and Eszterhazy was showing him sights. "I hope you have not picked up anything in that flea-pit. I warned you. But you *would* go."

"I have sprinkled with powder. But tell me, though, Compeer" — Dr. J.M.R. v.d. C. was a fellow-member of the Effectively Noble Order of Saint Bridget of Sweden (Savants' Section) — "who and what is or was '*Purser-johnny*'?"

"Prester John," said his compeer, shortly.

"Ah, ahah!" sang out the Netherlander, in high delight; "Prester *John*!" — as though the emphasis would save from confusion with any possible Prester Jane, Prester William, or (shall we say) Prester Olga. "I did think it would be most unusual for any mere *purser* to achieve apotheosis —"

"Most unusual," agreed Dr. Eszterhazy. Wondered if he should refer to the process for which the British in India had a name, whereby unfamiliar ethnically-exotic words were transformed into ethnically-familiar words — such as assuming that the names of the Prophet's grandsons, *Hassan* and *Hussein*, were actually the home-like *Hobson* and *Jobson*. He decided not to. Van der Clooster was very knowledgeable, but he was (often) very heavy. If, for example, one referred to "the songs of Homer," van der Clooster might ask if one meant Homer, the Hellenic poet, or Homer Rodeheaver, the American hymn-singing evangelist. Eszterhazy observed, as they proceeded, the perhaps picturesque population of the teeming South Ward; but he for once (*once*?) observed without enthusiasm.

"Tell me, my dear Compeer," avoiding the erratically-located stall of a seller of "green" sausage, "who do you think Prester John really was?" — van der Clooster.

The mid-afternoon chimes of a clock-tower sounded nearby, informing them, musically, of the not-very-latest-news, viz., that Malbrouk had gone to war. A wind, brief but brisk, stirred about the usual South Ward stirabout of old pie-papers, old fruit-peelings, dust, desiccated horse-dung; and blew away the ragged clouds, revealing patches of blue skies, revealing the mountains.

Some might perhaps perform the same tasks day after day, month after month, year after year, without fatigue: His High Highness the Heir, for example, never tired of hunting, or of taking troops on manoeuvres; for that matter, Betti and Borri Kratt, who rolled meat-pie-crust in a room in an alley off Lower Hunyadi Street, never tired of mixing flour and water and processing dough. Did Dr. Eszterhazy never tire of reading books, of studying and studying, day in and month-year-out?

Sometimes, yes he did.

"Who do you think wrote the famous so-called Letter from Prester John, claiming to be both priest and king, thus causing medieval Christendom to look upon him as its possible savior from the Mongol Hordes; who?"

A flock of brown-and-white milch-goats followed its piping herdsman, ready to provide strictly-fresh milch as when/where called for, passed by; Eszterhazy, stepping delicately, avoided the evidences of its passage. "Who?" echo of Little Handsome Hansli? "One may only guess. My guess is that some medieval monk on Mount Athos wrote it, in a fit of boredom and wishful thinking."

Van der Clooster disputed the guess until they reached their next stop, the Archbishopal Museum; and after that they called at Rudl's Famous Mussels with Fresh Sweet Butter House. And then they went to Dr. v.d. Clooster's hotel rooms for Holland gin. And then it was time to take the visiting savant to catch his train for Zagreb. Ah, Zagreb! Glamorous, sparkling, brilliant Zagreb! Eh? Well, maybe not.

Steam engineering, his current study, had grown lately just a trifle stale, perhaps from overwork; half, Eszterhazy wished to geologize a bit; half, he would study Sympathetic Ethnology, (i.e., Magic) among the Men of the Mountains. And, whilst he hesitated, the voice of a spirit whispered in his ear, "Why not try both?"

Geologists, amateur and professional, had tapped the rocks and stones of the Hyperthracian Hills, and, discovering no mines of gold and silver or precious stones or coal, had departed. Botanists bearing butterfly nets had sallied through them, failed to find exciting new specimens, and also departed. Each mountain (and each valley) was said to have its own peculiar count or prince — and some of them were said to be very peculiar indeed. This profusion of nobility was held, in Bella and in Avar-Ister, to be perhaps not in the best of taste. "If a man there has a cow, he's a count," it was said in those cities. "If he has two, he's a prince." The princes, anyway, were

proud, even if poor; Bella and Avar-Ister did not like them? Of no importance, they did not like Bella or Avar-Ister. So there. They stayed in their remote reaches and recesses, reportedly pursuing, barefooted, the chamois from crag to crag, exercising the *jus primae noctis*, and administering the rough and ready justice of the region without much recourse to the larger and more lagging units of government.

Many thought these petty chieftains to be a joke, but Eszterhazy was not among that many. In his first class at the School of Geology, the Lecturer, trying to slide them in easily without the use of too many technical terms right away, had explained that mountains might be divided into two categories: "Young, *rugged* mountains . . . and old, worn-down mountains." And had explained this and explained this forever. Eszterhazy, at least, would never forget it. The Hyperthracian Hills, then, were old, worn-down mountains. And their minor nobility were an old, worn-down nobility, dating back to the times of Tsar Samuel and the Bulgarian Wars, and the troubled era which followed. Who had held rule in Little Byzantia and the Hyperthracian Hills, then? who kept the poor man's crops and the widow's goat-kid from the fire? and, who had protected the pedlar's pack and market-stall? when the Palaeologian Dynasty in Constantinople was tottering to its end; and the Ottoman Empire not yet achieved that which was to allow a traveller, even as a conquered subject, to walk one league along a road in safety? Who had exercised *misrule* was both easier and harder to say: *brigands*, certainly: nature was not alone in abhorring a vacuum, vacuums occurred in power as well as in laboratories; brigandage formed as scum forms on stagnant water. *Who* — in the as yet nameless mountains and wilderness areas later called Greater and Little Byzantia — who had filled that vacuum, who alone had enforced the Natural Law and the Social Contract?

The petty princes, then not so petty; the minor nobility, then not so minor.

That is not to say that they had governed well, for sometimes some of them had governed ill. But, as a certain ancient rabbi (Eszterhazy did not remember his name) was cited as having said, "Pray for the welfare of the government; for, were it not for the fear of it, men would swallow one another up alive."

Of course nowadays, he thought, glancing at this official structure and that, one placed one's trust in such institutions as the Constitutional Monarchy, the Parliamentary Rule, and the Dedicated Civil Service. And — looking elsewhere around the world — God! one had better!

On his way home from the perhaps over-large railroad station, Eszterhazy, glancing helplessly from right to left from the midst of the usual tie-up of jammed wagons and carriages, observed a light landau of the latest design (with royal crest upon the door), the driver of which was rather recklessly plying his whip — and not seeming much to regard upon whose beast or body the lash came down. Seated in the carriage was a young man whose

weakly-handsome features were immediately familiar: and not alone because he looked rather like Little Handsome Hansli, and this started another, and yet not dissimilar, trend of thought.

August Salvador Ferdinand Louis Maurits was the son of Ignats Salvador Samuel, Heir to the Triple Crown: in short, he was heir to the Heir. The Crown Princeling was in his early twenties, and some said that his rosy face was adorned with merely whiskers and weak good looks; and some, whatever they may have thought, did *not* say so. True that there were no *lettres de cachet*, no Bastille nor its equivalent: still, why make waves?

Baron Burgenblitz of Blitzenburg knew why — *he liked* making waves. “I say that we could learn a thing or two from the Turks in the matter of succession,” said he. “Pick the likeliest lad among the next of kin, and as for the rest, strangle the lot!” This prickly Baron was not welcome in many houses in Bella; fat lot *he* cared.

When Bummschkejer’s, the great drapers on Austerlitz Crescent, had exhibited its first wax mannequins, there had been enormous excitement. The woman-mannequin had been greatly admired for her Paris fashions, as she stood in the window. But when the throng in Bella had observed that the man-mannequin, with his almost-impossibly-regular arched eyebrows, intense blue eyes, Cupid’s bow and cherry-red lips, pale strawberry-pink complexion, beautifully fuzzy whiskers, and immaculately-shaven chin — an instant conviction had been formed that the mannequin was actually a statue of the Crown Princeling.

And what else of the Crown Princeling?

Ignats Louis, the King-Emperor, not one of your keen disciples of Pestalozzi or any other professor of theories of education, had said once or twice, “As long as the lad has learned his catechism and can sit a horse, who cares if he knows mathematiccy and the Spanish guitar?” On the few occasions when they — briefly — informally — met, the Crown Princeling addressed the King-Emperor as “Bobbo,” and the King-Emperor addressed the Crown Princeling as “Baby.”

As for the Heir himself, he was always rather busy slitting up the boars and stags which he hunted to the sound of drums and trumpets according to the custom of the antique *battue*; and when not, he was busy drilling his regiments. To the officers and men of his regiments, he applied more or less the same standard as his sovereign applied to the Crown Princeling, save that he was rather more liberal in regard to the catechism. “Mind you,” he said, “I won’t have no outright heresy in me ranks; none of them Dacians, Luetics or pedagogues, or whatever they be called. But I ain’t too pertickler if a man’s a bit muzzy about the difference between them mortuary and them venereal sins, for I ain’t too clear about ’em meself.” There were said to be a few things which the Heir was none too clear about; never mind.

“But I hate a man who haven’t got a good seat. Flog a fellow a few times and he’ll sit up straight and do the jumps real good, see if he don’t.” One

saw.

Under the circumstances, it was perhaps not to be expected that strict application to any course of study was required of the Crown Princeling; and this was just as well (Eszterhazy thought), because certainly none was forthcoming. He grew up able to sit a horse well enough on parade, and to hunt the boar and stag; and one saw him often at the lighter theaters and music halls and race-tracks and cabarets; and, beyond that, if there was nothing, well, at least one saw and heard nothing.

In an open and competitive examination for the Throne, Ignats Louis, the King and Emperor (King of Scythia, King of Pannonia, Grand Hetman of Hyperborea, Emperor of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania) would not even have won a scholarship. But what he did not have in wits, he made up for by his immensely paternal personality, as the Heir made up for his own lack with a dogmatic doggedness which at least got things done. But with what did the Heir's heir, August Salvador, the Crown Princeling, compensate? Fortunate that the question was seldom asked, for there seemed seldom if any answer.

Well! The King-Emperor was in good health, the Heir was as strong as a bull, one prayed for long life for both of them — and for the rest, one trusted in the principles of Constitutional Monarchy, Parliamentary Rule, and a Dedicated Civil Service —

God! One had better!

Eszterhazy had most recently seen the Royal and Imperial Youngling at the latest quarterly levee. Present was the entire Diplomatic Corps, including His Highness Sri Jam Jam Bahadur Bhop, Titular Personal Envoy of the Grand Mogul. The Grand Mogul himself was living, not very grandly, in exile, in Burmah, having (rather rashly) assumed — and not he alone — that the Englishmen visible in India had been all the Englishmen there were . . . and now and then he fretfully complained about the low quality of his opium ration; but these facts had as yet been but dimly perceived in Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania, where the British Ambassador, Sir Augustus Fink-Nottle, saw no reason to press the point. He always bowed very politely whenever he encountered Sri Jam Jam, a nonogenarian who lived chiefly on Turkish Delight. The American Minister, General Hiram A. Abercrombie, not one of your sticklers for protocol, thought that old Sri Jam Jam was the Grand Mogul, and always saluted him. The old man, in turn, seeing that Abercrombie (in the democratic-republican manner) wore no uniform, believed him to be one of the butlers, and always gave him a tip. The general always took it. The carpets of the Titular Personal Envoy were regularly cleaned (for free) by the Armenian Lesser Merchants' Guild, which retained fading but still-fond memories of the protection offered by a long-past Grand Mogul to their merchant-shipping in the Indian Ocean at a time when it was being rather vexed by one Wm. Kidd, a Master of Craft, and one with some very *odd* notions of the principles of *meum* and *tuum*.

Also present and accounted for as a fully-accredited member, in fact the Doyen or senior member, of the Corps Diplomatique, was the Nobly Born Legate of the Grand Master of the Sovereign Order of the Knights of Malta; rumor, painted full of tongues, from time to time, circulated in Bella to the effect that the Knights were indeed no longer sovereign in Malta; but the Minister of Foreign Affairs had a rather *large* back-log of work, and no time to pay attention to rumors. "Where *are* all these places in Southern America?" once he asked Dr. Eszterhazy, distractedly. "What *is* the Argentine Republic? Once there was a Confederation of the La Plata; *why* can I not find it on my map? The Emperors of Hayti and Brazil do *not* answer their *mails*. And — *is* the Confederation of the La Plata the same as the Confederate States, or is it *not*? *Do* we recognize these American States, or do we recognize only some of them, and if so, *which*? What and where *is* the Republic of Texas? Things were simpler before Bonaparte, don't you agree, Engelbert?" Dr. Engelbert Eszterhazy said that things were seldom simple, and that this was no exception.

"However," said he, "we must take things as we find them. I shall send you a minute on the American question. ["Oh, *thank* you, Engelbert!"] — meanwhile, should we not reply to the request from the Republic of San Marino to lower the excise tax on pasta . . . or is it pizza?"

"I don't know, it is so long since I have studied Dante," said the Foreign Minister, dolefully.

It was on this occasion — i.e., that of the levee — that His Young Highness the Crown Princeling, in reply to the question if *he* thought that Prester John had lived in Abyssinia, revealed that he had never *heard* of Prester John. Or, for that matter, Abyssinia.

"Is that the same as Absentia?"

"Oh, your Young Highness! Surely you will recall [*sotto voce*] that Prester John was a mysterious and possibly mythical king who, it was hoped, would save the world from the Mongol Hordes? There *is* no such place as Absentia!"

"The which from what? Nonsense. Course there is. Remember What's-his-name, who fiddled the regimental accounts and fled the country? Was tried in Absentia, wasn't he?"

"Oh Your Young Highness! The Mongol *hordes*! Genghis Khan and Tamurlane! Towers of skulls, you know."

"Anything like the Tunnel of Love?"

A nearby and newly-arrived Emissary (from the Ty-coon of Cho-sen, or some such place and title), fortunately at that moment asked if he might hear some example of the native music of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania. Dr. Eszterhazy's tenor immediately began the chorus to a popular tune of which the Noble Infant was sure to have heard; and in a moment the Crown Princeling's baritone enthusiastically joined in with

Port, port, *port*, and

port, port, *port*, oh
Heigh-ho and *jolly*-oh,
Oh, port, port, *port*!

If the Congress of Europe could only be run along the lines of a glee club, then Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania would be sure to prosper.

Meanwhile, it was certainly time for Eszterhazy to have his holidays — or, as the Americans would call them, vacation.

The Heir considered the boars of Greater Byzantia to be runty, and there were not enough stags; also the topography was not favorable to cavalry charges; and these opinions he carried over to the adjacent regions of the Hyperthracian Mountains. The Heir went there but seldom. And as there was a paucity of light theaters, cabarets, race-tracks, and music halls, the Crown Princeling never went there at all. But every seven and a half years, come drought or flood or whatever, the King and Emperor went there; and on one such visitation, years ago, Eszterhazy had been an equerry, Yohan Popoff a prince-host: and so an odd sort of friendship had developed.

And so, soon after van der Clooster had departed for Zagreb, Dr. Eszterhazy put aside steam engineering for a dual-purpose visit to the Hyperthracian Hills.

"And what shall ye do with these wee bits of prettystone ye've gathered?" asked Prince Popoff, at table. *His* table.

"Set some of them, anyway, in brooches, and give them to my aunties," said Eszterhazy, promptly — not wishing to bother his host with boring descriptions of trituration, spectroscopic analysis, and the like —

— and besides, some of them he *did* propose to set in brooches and give them to his aunties.

"Very good," said his host. "Then ye'll not be digging great holes and corrupting my peoples with moneys. Goats *fall* into great holes sometimes, if they be new great holes. And about the only times my peoples see moneys is when some strangers have to pause at the cross-stop and pay the imposts for their goods and gear. Which ain't often, as there are easier ways to get out of Austria than this way. To get *into* Austria, for that matter.

Eszterhazy was not thinking much about Austria, save that he knew that the forthcoming Congress of Europe was to be held in Vienna. Mostly he was thinking how pleasant it was to be in this mountain fastness so far from Bella (and from Vienna, too, for that matter) and its cares, and how restful and trustworthy not-so-old Popoff was, and how rustic and pleasant he looked. Then at once there entered someone new to him, an old woman who did not think so. At all.

"You have no face, you have no stomach," she squawled at the Prince. "Look, look! crumbs in your moustache, wudkey on your breath, wine on your waistcoat, your hair looks like badly stooked straw, last week's shirt;

what an example for a prince of the mountains and a descendant of His Reverence — *I* don't know — my life has been wasted, poured out like wash-water; you might as well have grown up in the sty, sucking the grey sow's teat; where is the hot bread for the zoop, the hot *bread* for the *zoop*? Holy Souls in Purgatory, is no one at work in the *kitchen*?" Never ceasing to scold and shriek, she hustled out; old and scrannel, not in the least picturesque, boney and rat-toothed, leaving behind her the echo of her voice — like a badly-worn cylinder for one of the new talking-machines: Edisonola, it was called — and an odor of onions and armpits.

Eszterhazy supposed her to have been either mother or mother-in-law, or possibly the invariable "extra-aunt"; had she been mistress or wife, certainly she would long ago have been dropped off the Bear-Tooth Crag, with a couple of pig-irons (to be retrieved later) on each leg. But —

"She was my wet-nurse," said Prince Popoff, whose arcane talents evidently included telepathy; "of course I need a wet-nurse now the way I need another orifice in my fundament, but I can't get rid of her."

"Doubtless she is very faithful," murmured Eszterhazy.

Popoff scratched his thatchy chest, gave a *deep* grunt. "You *think* so?" he next asked. "I assure you she would poison my zoop for a penny if she thought she could cheat my sons the way she cheats me. I shall douse you with wine," he said, pouring a nice slop onto the be-sopped table-cloth, and a bit more into his guest's glass. This was old high courtesy, mountain style, and was supposedly to put Eszterhazy at his ease, and make him need not worry if he slopped some himself; how tactful, yes? Not according to the Uniate Exilarch, Venerable Joachim Uzzias, D.Th., III, who declared it to be a pagan libation, and had written a pamphlet denouncing it. The Uniate Exilarch never ventured within a hundred miles of the mountain principalities, for the princes would certainly have burned him alive on general and hereditary principles before the government could have interfered; perhaps to display his scholarship or perhaps from prudence, the Venerable had published the pamphlet in Ancient Armenian, doubtless to the edification and enlightenment of any Ancient Armenians who could read it. The *modern* Armenians, most tactful of living men, had bound their presentation copy in tooled morocco, and deposited it in a mesh-fronted bookcase, the key to which was immediately lost, in their Guildhall, in Bella. And had peacefully gone on about their business of roasting and grinding the best-grade coffee, washing carpet-wool, goat-hair, and hog-bristles; cleaning the rugs of all the best houses in Bella (the worst were lucky to have their trod-mud floors covered with fresh rushes twice or thrice a reign), including those of Jam Jam Sahib; and processing a certain quality of millet much favored by the Town Tartars for feeding to their cage-finches — but perhaps no more for now of the Armenians, excellent people; they scarcely enter this account at all. *Sometime* maybe. *Maybe* not.

"Really?" enquired Eszterhazy, the nanny having re-entered with the hot

bread and re-exited because there was not enough of it. "One is certainly told that the servants of this ancient house —"

"— been here forever," said Prince Yohan, a trifle mechanically; "or, at any rate, a very long time."

"— are famous for their loyalty and devotion."

"To the ancient *house*," said the prince, starting to slurp his zoop. "Not to any particular member of it. Wait! Let me crush ye some peppers, else the zoop will be bland as maize-pap," he made a gesture — several gestures, in fact — and a pestle of malachite began to grind in a mortar of chalcedony (both, perhaps, once graced the table of a Grand Comnenus in Trebizond, before the horses and riders of Ottoman the Turk had galloped out of the east . . . and galloped . . . and galloped . . . and galloped . . .) — the mortar and pestle ground: no visible and corporeal hands ground with them. Certainly not those of the rustic prince, which rested prominently a ways off, on the table. This prince awaited the response of Dr. Eszterhazy, his guest.

There was no response.

The reputation of these minor semi-sovereigns for magic was of course well-known. *Well-known*.

"Take," invited Prince Yohan, concealing his disappointment, if any. "Take some on your spoon and stir it about in the zoop." His eyes roved round the setting on Eszterhazy's side of the table. "What!" he exclaimed. "They have given you no spoon? Animals! My father would have had them impaled . . . well, my grandfather . . . certainly my great-grandfather —"

The prince began to whistle, snap his fingers, stamp his foot. "Pray do not bother, Your Vigor," said Dr. Eszterhazy.

"But ye must have a spoon!"

"Certainly. And as you have told me often enough that your guests have the liberty of your kingdom, I shall take the liberty of taking *yours*," Eszterhazy indicated. With his finger. Did he crook his finger? He did something with his finger. And His Vigor, Yohan, Prince Popoff, watched dismally as his spoon slithered across the table, mounted into the mortar, gathered half a load of crushed peppers, and slithered across the rest of the table, coming conveniently to a stop-slither at Eszterhazy's hand. Who calmly stirred it into his zoop, then lifted the stoup to his lips, and drank off its contents.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Delicious! Ah, there is nothing like a good, old-fashioned stoup of zoop!"

Said his host, at last meeting his eyes, "You have learned much."

"And still have much to learn," was the reply.

The prince gave, this time, a merely minor grunt. "Well, as ye have heard, as I have said, ye have, we both have, the liberty of — Well, I shall see what I can do for — You can read the Szekel runes, my guest?"

"Those, and others."

"The language of the Old Men and the Dead."

"Both."

"Essential. And — Aramaic?"

"Yes. Though it depends a good deal on the characters used. The Hebrew ones I read with fair ease. The Nestorian, rather less so. And as for the Jacobite, I must first transliterate. Then I have comparatively little trouble."

"All right. And as for the medieval Latin and Greek, I am sure I need not ask. So. In the morning —"

"If you don't die in your own dirt by then," interrupted the old wet-nurse, entering with a tray pressed to her bodice. "Some of them pots hasn't been cleaned since Sobieski was King of Poland and Tessie was King of Hungary; much you care. Here. Sweet and sour sow. Certain, I culled the raisins with my own fingers. Who else 'ud do it? Not them high and mighty wenches, who creeps in and out of Someone's bed on their filthy feet. Ah —"

"Put it down, Wetsy," directed the prince. "And you may retire tomorrow and on full pension, as well you know."

She may well have known, but know it or not, she made no reply, but addressed her next remark to her one-time nursing's guest.

The old woman had set a second dish down, evidently a pasta pudding with fat, spices, and honey; and she put her hands on her hips and looked at him. "So tell me, Sir Philosopher," she said, after a moment, "be's it true that some wiselings such as you, they are a-seeking for to make a machine which it will fly?"

The pudding, the sort which he would have killed for when a boy, looked impossibly heavy, and might have killed him now. There was a bason of small apples; he would numble one of them for his dessert; and in the meanwhile, the longer he could keep the conversation off the pudding, the better. "Yes, Mother," he said — and such a look she flashed at him! He had best remember not to "Mother" her again — "it is true. Some of them are seeking."

She asked, with every sign of sincerity, "Why don't they study trees? Shrubs?"

He asked, a bit puzzled, "Why? Are there trees and shrubs which fly?" She nodded, curtly, as though this itself was a matter well-known, and of not much interest. "Oh. How can one tell . . . which, I mean?"

"One goes and learns," she said. Prince Popoff ate silently. "One can tell . . . oh, by the way the knots are formed . . . for instance . . . and by the way the trees reach towards the sky. And the way the shrub-twigs behave."

A piece of the sweetened pasta, browned by the oven, fell from the prince's mouth to his waistcoat. He picked it up and put it in his mouth again.

"No more manners than the piebald dog," the old woman commented.

"Will you teach me, then? I will give —"

"No," she said. "I can't teach you. You are not ready. I can tell that by . . ." she reached out a finger-nail (it had not been cleaned lately) and let it rest a

moment between his brows. ". . . the eyes. Maybe some day."

Her look, which had been a trifle abstracted, now came to focus on the present once again. Swiftly she scanned the table, then again she put her gaze on the guest. "And the zoop was no good, I suppose. They makes it better in Bella, I am sure."

Heroic measures were called for, else she might begin asking about the pudding. "First rate it was, Madámka. No, they don't. And here's something to prove it." And something popped up and peeped out of the doctor's pocket and described a parabola as it passed over the table. It was the size, shape, and glitter of a gold *royál*, and so perhaps it *was* one — though who can indeed be sure, as it came to rest in Madámka's left ear, whither one would not have wished to follow and examine. Evidently feeling no such non-wish or scruple, she *did* examine it, immediately redeposited it in her bosom, made an antique curtsy (during which at least seventeen bones were heard to snap, crackle, and pop), and left the dining room in such haste as to make one suspect that she may have suspected Eszterhazy of being willing to change his mind.

Eszterhazy had earlier smoked a long pipe of the local, infernally strong *dabág* as it was called; he felt now a desire for the Indian weed, but in a milder and mellower form. Also he desired to remove traces of the meal from face and fingers. So, leaving his host with his own long pipe, his feet into the fireplace, and being smoked by sundry smokes; Eszterhazy ascended with measured tread up to his rooms.

Paradox was plentiful within the halls of Castle Popoff. When Eszterhazy went to wash his hands and face, he saw the basin was marble and the ewer was onyx; but when, having by and by dropped a quantity of segar ashes, he looked for a broom to sweep it up, he found no semblance of the familiar civilized item of yellow straw, fitted up and stitched together by Tartar or Gypsy aided by a device like an enormous tuning-fork, no: he saw a bundle of coarse vegetation rudely bound to the butt-end of a stick; in short, a two-penny *bezom* such as one's country-cousin's servants use to expel the dried mud from the porch. Eszterhazy decided to let the ash lie. The Indian segar had been rolled around a reed; withdrawn before smoking, this left quite a nice air-channel, and required no cutting or biting of the end: curiously, as the ash fell upon the dark drugget, it retained the hole where the reed had been, thus clearly identifying itself to be the ash of a Trichinopoly cheroot, as any fool could plainly see, and hardly required reading a monograph on the subject.

Next morning. Going through the Great Hall in hopes of finding some breakfast other than the one deposited in his ante-room — a panikin of coffee astringent enough to tan hides, a pot of quite cold maize-pap, and the pickled head of a large lacustrine fish — passing through the Great Hall, adorned with rude and massive furniture, on or in which giants might have

sat cross-legged and smaller men have camped, with rusting and not so rusting stag-spears and boar-spears, spring-guns and man-traps, banners warped and tattered with very great age, a ragged and hairless hide which might just possibly be (he thought, afterwards) the skin of a flayed enemy — walking through the Great Hall, Eszterhazy heard a low, murmuring voice, apparently coming from a room with an open door; automatically, he peeped in and paused.

It was evidently the chapel (or evidently *a* chapel) and within, with a minuscule congregation, someone was celebrating the Divine Liturgy. Or, to use the phrase favored by another facet of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, someone was saying mass. Very well, the House of Popoff, though it had not particularly impressed him as being particularly pious, had a chaplain. And the Chaplain was reciting his daily Office. No reason why not. Though it was slightly surprising that the chapel door was almost immediately and silently closed in his, Eszterhazy's, face. Still —

In the immense kitchen where the somewhat surprised staff was giving him such citified foods as a pan of gammon and eggs, browned bread with goose grease (he declined the cracklings, at least for breakfast), and a cup of "weak" coffee — it was quite strong enough to satisfy the Death's Head Hussars, whose coffee was famously strong — in this corner of the huge kitchen, Dr. Eszterhazy let his mind wander back to the scene in the small room. Maybe the chaplain was some hedge-parson with dubious credentials, and that was why they did not want the guest to see him and perhaps inadvertently make a report. Well enough; understandable — but why, in that case, since Eszterhazy knew no such cleric, why was he so sure that he had at least partly recognized the priest, though indeed his face he had not seen.

Then, too, he was — despite the briefness of his glimpse — absolutely sure that the service being celebrated was neither Roman Catholic nor Eastern Orthodox; certainly it was not Uniate (or Eastern Catholic) either; having experienced many an English Sunday, he knew that it was not Anglican: what, then, was it?

Easier to ask, than answer.

Somewhat he had seemed to sense affinities to the Rites of Malabar. But the Malabar Rites had been abolished. *Hadn't* they? And, anyway, somewhat he hadn't seemed. So — certainly it was something else. So. In which case, *what* else?

Of a kitchen-hand he asked at a venture, "Is that a *Romi* service they are holding up yonder?"

The kitchen-hand's reply, smacking nothing of the Council of Nicea, was, in toto, "You don't *like* your eggs, my Little Lord?"

It didn't smack of the Council of Trent, either.

"Sure I like them. Let's have another piece of gammon, here —"

"There bain't another piece of gammon, my Little Lord —".

"— and I'll let you have some real good snuff, Swartbloi's, the best in Bella." Eyes gleaming and nostrils twitching, the kitchen-hand departed, walking fast. By and by he returned, depositing on Dr. Eszterhazy's plate something resembling a desiccated bat.

"Cook have locked the larder, my Little Lord, and she keeps the key atween her you-know-whats; but I've brought 'ee a pickled pigeon, my Little Lord, up from the Servants' Cellar; and I've told Cellarman I'll share the nose-baccy with he."

Somehow the "Little Lord," Engelbert Eszterhazy, A.B., Phil.B., M.A., M.S., M.D., D. Muc., D. Phil., Ph.D., D. Sc., and much more, did not fancy the pickled pigeon; but he gave over the snuff anyway. And, by and by, his host appearing, they went up to the Old Book Room in the South Tower and looked at a lot of old books. And then they went up into the mountains and tried — by word and song and gesture and something more — to move a lot of old boulders.

Some of them they *did* move, and some of them they *didn't* move.

And what with one thing and another, the scene in the semi-secret sanctuary quite went from his mind. And it was a long time before it returned.

The earth of the Red Mountain (not very far off was the Black Mountain, Montenegro, an independent country whose prince-bishops had not very long ago become kings) — the earth of the Red Mountain had been transmuted by spring rain into red mud, and Eszterhazy did not move with perfect ease.

"I don't *mind*, particularly, shooting at a bird with a cross-bow," he said, out in the woods of the mountain with his instructor; "but I think I particularly mind shooting with a cross-bow at a great auk, because I well know it to be extinct; besides it never lived *here*."

"Less rattlement," warned his instructor, "or I'll make ye shoot at a dodo. Up a little to the right, and forward."

Eszterhazy saw the great auk fall; but when he went to retrieve it (the hound absolutely refused), it had vanished. Some days later, however, he saw it in the muniments room, in a glass case. In the case next to it he saw a clutch of ostrich eggs. And in the glass case next to *it*, he saw the dodo. Both birds were smeared about the feet with what seemed to be dried red mud.

One day, not many days later, as they were standing at an open window, Prince Yohan suddenly exclaimed, "Hah! This is scrying time. *Fine* time for scrying, this!"

Deeply interested, Eszterhazy asked, "How do you know?"

Prince Popoff showed him a face slightly surprised. "How *know*? Why . . . the time of the month — Taurus, upon the cusps of the Ram — the cuspal times are decidedly best for scrying, one isn't sure why. — And then, too, observe the weather! The air's not flat and dead, such as leaves the living images lying slack

all around, no: neither is there a tearing wind or storm, you know, that's no good, that tears the living images all up, and scatters them about, you see.

"But just look now. You see the air is clear and clean; you see how the clouds are scudding along and there's brisk breeze. That means the living images will move along fairly quickly, it means that you can see them fairly clearly and cleanly in the scrying ink or in the scry-stone or scrying glass. One doesn't always use a pool of ink, you know."

Eszterhazy said he knew. "There are those who use a crystal ball," he said.

Prince Popoff now looked at him in more than mere surprise. "There *are*?" he cried. He was absolutely astonished.

By and by, having recovered from his astonishment, he took his guest into an inner room where they had not been before. It had been plastered, but it had not been plastered lately, and patches of the primeval plaster had here and there crumbled and fallen, revealing — beneath the place where the plasma and slab of lime, sand, and water had been — areas of the primeval stone walling of the chamber. On the walls hung (often rather askew) badly engraved likenesses of the present emperor, sundry kings and so on; as well as wood-cuts of various voyvodes, counts, boyars, mukhtars and mamelukes and metropolitans and mprets and patriarchs and princes — God help us! — who knew who else? Eszterhazy, widely believed to know everything, knew not all of them — including a likeness of a sombre, brooding, melancholy countenance, a likeness (going by a name scribbled in a corner of the [perhaps] drawing) which he thought was perhaps of that John who was not only the last Catholic King of Sweden (bad timing, John) and enemy of the famous (infamous?) Gustav the Troll, but also the last Swedish King of Poland (bad timing, Poland) — though maybe it wasn't.

There was also a copy of the Martin Behaim map, with gores, presented to the English King Henry VIII, powerful presumptive evidence of the early discovery of Australia; only Henry wasn't interested in having Australia discovered (he was far more interested in discovering what he called the "pretty duckies" of Anne Boleyn), and neither was anyone in Scythia, Pannonia, Transbalkania, or Great or Little Byzantia. How came it here? Who the Hell knows; where it didn't have cobwebs, it had fly-specks. There were old globes almost moist with the foam of perilous seas in faërie lands forlorn, and here and there were odd skulls of the wisent, the aurochs, the wild mules of the Veneti, and — perhaps, perhaps — the unicorn: and if it wasn't a unicorn, what *was* it? the rhinoceros, oryx, or narwhale? Nonsense. What would a skull of a rhinoceros, oryx, or narwhale be doing on the wall of an olden *schloss* in Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania? *Ha!* Have you there!

"You can have half my kingdom," said Prince Popoff, seating himself, "but you can't have my chair. Pull up another." And while his guest was pulling, the prince opened a small ebony chest from which he removed a something swathed in somewhat soiled white samite, and from the wrapping extracted a rather glossy black stone. Maybe Doctor Dee thought it was

coal, and maybe Edward *Kelly* thought that it was coal, and maybe Horace *Walpole* thought it was coal; but Dr. Engelbert Eszterhazy thought that it was not coal. Prince Popoff took it very carefully in his hands; and, saying, "Hold it like *this*," held it like *this*.

After some moments, he said, "It is not necessary, but it helps to repeat what was said by Bishop Albert of Ratisbon — oh, very well, then, *Regensburg* — called 'the Great' — Albertus, I mean, not the city —" and he repeated some phrases, in what some might regard as a rather debased Latin of the Swabian sort; others, on the other hand, might regard it as "Humanistic," and not debased at all.

Eszterhazy watched carefully, sometimes he had rather to squint, he did repeat the phrases as best he remembered them (he remembered them rather well); and then —

"Hm," said Prince Yohan. The surface of the stone, the upper surface, which had evidently once been highly polished, which so far had remained rather glossy or might one say sheeny, suddenly displayed a face. A human face.

At first Eszterhazy could not make it out. It seemed to slide across the face of the stone — or perhaps it was across his own vision — as though imprinted on a piece of silk which moved, passed, at an odd angle and in a way which he could no more identify than he could the likeness itself. Prince Yohan, though, seemed to be having less trouble. But then, he had had more experience. "Who is this mere child, of man size and, I suppose, man's estate?" he asked. Eszterhazy could of course not answer, though he strove to get the image back in focus as his host held it rather slightly obliquely.

"He must be of importance," the Prince went on, staring into the surface, "else why has Psalmanazzar scried him?"

"*Psalmanazzar*?"

"Yes. *Psalmanazzar*. Its name. *Ships* have names, do they not? And so do scry-stones. The scry-stone of my uncle-cousin, Baron Big Boris, is named *Agag*, because it walks delicately. A metaphor, of course. Well, as for this youngling, I see passion plain in his face . . . a mere prettyboy? no: more . . . I see lust, and resolution and *ir*resolution, mixed. . . . Tell me, so, savant, who is he?"

And Eszterhazy again gazed swift into the scry-stone and swift he saw the face one instant fixed before it fled into flux and swift he cried aloud and answered, "O God! O Christ Human and Divine! It is August Salvador, the Crown Princeling! Oh!"

In the brief pause which followed, he noticed that the room smelled of mold. Then he asked, "What is he doing *here*? I mean, *there*? And is he near — or far?"

Said this wise man of the mountains, "Middling near. And getting nearer. What —?"

Eszterhazy said that they would soon see "*what*." And, "How quickly can I get a message to the nearest telegraph office?" he asked.

Said Prince Popoff, "Write it. And we shall see how soon." He led Eszterhazy to another desk, satisfied himself that it provided paper which would take ink, ink which was not too gummy, a steel pen whose nib he promptly licked to make certain that it would hold the ink, and powdered cuttlefish bone to dry it. Then he began to bellow. By the time Eszterhazy had finished the message and shaken the powder off the paper —

VON SHTRUMPF. OFFICE OF THE PRIVY PURSE, it ran. KINDLY INFORM WHEREABOUTS H.H. THE CROWN PRINCELING. E. ESZTERHAZY —

— someone was waiting to take the message in a large and hairy hand. A mountain pony, saddled and bridled and only a bit hairier, had appeared in the courtyard to carry the messenger.

"Stay for an answer," Popoff instructed. "And — Constable — if anyone tries to wait in the office to observe either the message or the reply, discourage him or them from doing so, d'ye *hear*? And all this under the invisible seal of silence; *go!*"

A clap-clap of hooves and a flurry on the road. Then, "Now we must wait," said the prince; "meanwhile let me show you further how holding the scry-stone so as to be best read is like holding the clinical thermometer so as to be best read."

Eszterhazy said, "Axillarily, I see no problem. Orally, I see a small problem. Rectally, I —"

"*Haw!*" said Prince Yohan. "Now . . . sometimes you have to shake it down first . . ."

IMPERIAL ORDERS, began the reply. DO NOT, REPEAT DO NOT, PERMIT TO PASS THE HIGH PERSON OF WHOM YOU ENQUIRE. SPECIAL DETAILS BY SPECIAL TRAIN. KISSING, VON SHTRUMPF.

"'Kissing?'" queried the prince. "*Kissing?*"

"Undoubtedly the abbreviated idiom of the telegraph, and certainly stands for 'KISSING THUS THE HANDS AND FEET,' and so on."

"Ah, just so, and highly proper," said the prince. "Well, the constable says he has had look-outs posted by the railroad at Zlink, and has given instructions that if a special train approaches *and does not stop*, they are to shoot at the engineer and stoker with powder and ball. Furthermore, we are piling logs upon the tracks a mile farther along, just before what we call Dead Man's Bridge Ravine —"

"I quite see why you do," murmured his guest.

"And whilst we're waiting, let's have some chops off last week's boar, and whilst we're waiting for *that*, let's have a pot of Mokha coffee with some Yah-mah-ee-ka rum. Eh?"

Said Eszterhazy, "Let's."

The "special details by special train" proved to consist, not in any manu-

script list, but of elements reposing within the bosoms of two distinguished persons; as their carriage and horses had also arrived by the same special train, those same eventually drew up within the courtyard. And therefrom they debouched. They knew Eszterhazy. Eszterhazy knew them. He proceeded to make introductions.

"Prince," he said, "allow me to present Reserve-Captain Von Shtrumpf, Gentleman-Serjeant of the Black Rod to the House of Peers, and ex-officio Chamberlain of the Office of the Privy Purse; Captain, my honored host, His Vigor, Prince Yohan Popoff." Both persons announced themselves to be *Enchanted*; and Eszterhazy proceeded to introduce Militia-Major Shtruvvelpeyter, a Principal Secretary to the Foreign Office. By a singular coincidence, once again the persons introduced were *Enchanted*. It went without saying that the members of the Royal and Imperial Family were above being officially managed by any Government offices. (Brought over the Irish Sea to sign the death-warrant of Charles I after conviction by the so-called High Court of Parliament, Colonel Hercules Hunks — actually — forthrightly told Cromwell, "My Lord General, two things are certain. First, this court can try no man. Second, no court can try the King." Cromwell, not one to stick on ceremony, said, "Thou art a peevish, froward fellow, Col. Hunks. Get thee hence." In private, Cromwell conceded that Hunks may have been technically correct. But he cut off King Charles's head anyway. Oh dear.) Yet the Royal and Imperial money-bags of S.-P.-T. were something else. Hence the politely-named Office of the Privy Purse. Which provided a good deal of management indeed.

One might say, for example, "Surely Your Young Highness's sense of honor and duty will prevent Your Young Highness from taking such a course"; yet His Young Highness's sense of honor and duty might *not* prevent him from taking such a course at all. If, however, one were to say to him (for example), "Alas, there is not currently so much as a single copperka to Your Young Highness's account in the Treasury. However, should Your Young Highness see fit to preside at the Dedication Ceremonies for the new Mechanical Drawbridge over the Ister and the new Civil Reformatory (dull as such ceremonies doubtless are), no doubt an advance subvention might be applied to the Office of the Privy Purse from the Public Works Accounts"; then one might manage him, if not quite well, then well enough. For a while, anyway.

Hence.

"Where is he, Engelbert, where *is* he?"

"Engli! Have you got him?"

"*'He'?* *'Him'?* Have I got *whom?*"

Both officials replied in joint voice, "*Baby!*"

"Ah, the Royal Infant. The Crown Princeling," said Eszterhazy. "No, *I* haven't got him. I can tell you, on local authority, however, that he is mid-dling near, and getting nearer. But . . . why do you ask?"

They were by now seated on the worn-smooth old front steps of Palace Popoff, or whatever it might be called. Vast vistas stretched in front of them: not merely blue in the distances, but, beyond the blue, grey and brown and some nondescript and probably indescribable colors.

"Why do we *ask* —?"

"— it is such a stupid story —"

The stupid story was soon told, unfinished as it was. Not only had the Crown Princeling — who was constitutionally forbidden to marry "a subject," because, as any fool might realize, to do so might and probably would create Faction — not only had he nevertheless made plans to do just that, but the "subject" was already married; a Gypsy dancer, she was already married to a Gypsy dancing-master and fiddler. More, she was estranged from him, and lived under the protection of (translation: was being kept by) a boss-butcher ("One of the biggest stalls in the Ox Market, he has, Engli."). And what did His Foolship think of these trifling trifles? That they were just that. "Love cares nothing for trifles," he was reputedly reported to have said. Did love care nothing for the Constitution and for bigamy? Evidently not a bit.

"Anyway, we are going to be married in another country so it will be all right," he had said. It made one want to beat his empty handsome head against a cattle-car.

So much for all hopes that he, only twice removed from The Throne, might get better sense as he grew older — and old enough to assume the three crowns which alone kept three countries together. The royal wittold did, however, take the precaution of travelling under another name; hence the hopeful card-case full of pasteboard imprinted with the name of BILL-SILAS SNEED, DRUMMER IN AMERICAN CLOTH AND CHEESE.

Really!

Of these three countries, one was Scythia, which, alone among the Indo-European-speaking nations of the world, spoke a modern dialect of Gothic; one was Pannonia, which spoke Avar, not an Indo-European language at all; and the third, Transbalkania, was not properly speaking, a country or nation at all, but a confederation, the peoples of which spoke a variety of tongues. And none of these nations, countries, or peoples liked each other very much at all.

Only the Triple Crown of the Triple Monarchy held them together. And the heir to the Heir was about to contract an illegal, unconstitutional, impermissible, and totally impossible non-marriage, acceptable to *none* of his peoples. Oh dear.

More.

Did he not *know* that the city in which he planned his nutty nuptials, *videlicet* Vienna, was about to hospit the Congress of Europe — where Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania would attempt finally to rectify its almost-unrectifiable boundaries — and that in consequence S.-P.-T. would become

a laughingstock? No. (Of course not.) Did he *care*? (Don't ask silly questions.) And, for a frowzy icing on this very rancid cake, just as Marie Antoinette did not want to flee from France until her diamond-crusted travelling-case was ready (in consequence of which delayed flight . . . well, never mind. Oh dear.), so August Salvador did not want to leave on his not-even-morganatic honeymoon without his wardrobe. And, lest by an examination at the border of his baggage, with its crest-embroidered underwear, he be discovered, he had hit upon the — for him — brilliant idea of concealing it all beneath a Seal of Diplomatic Immunity. And of which Immune Diplomat was the Seal?

That of the Titular Personal Envoy of the Grand Mogul.

Oh dear.

Popoff hauled out his maps; they were compared to those which Von Shtrumpf and Shtruvvelpeyter had brought with them. On which of the spider's-web of roads (assuming the web to have been spun out the anterior of a very drunken spider) which obtained between Bella and the border might His Young (not to say, infantile) Highness be assumed to be now in progress?

They came to no conclusion.

Popoff was not precisely shy about showing the use of his scry-stones; that is, he turned an enquiring look upon Eszterhazy, who nodded. That was enough for Popoff. Von Shtrumpf wished to be assured that no form of witchcraft was involved; Dr. Eszterhazy showed him in print, fetched down from the prince's shelves, that the last Ecclesiastical Council of Ister, whilst utterly condemning the ceremonial eating of horse-flesh on holy days "after the manner and usage of the pagan and damnable Sarmatians, upon whose so-called sacred places it is permitted, nay meritorious, to micturate"; said absolutely nothing on the subject of scrying: which was good enough for Von Shtrumpf. And Shtruvvelpeyter recollected that "he had read something-or-other about it in a French or German paper once — frightfully scientific these French and Germans were, not so, Engelbert?" — and that was good enough for Shtruvvelpeyter. So Popoff once again uncovered his scry-stones. *Psalmazzar*. And *Agag*.

Psalmazzar showed, briefly and rather vaguely, the Crown Princeling's face at the window of a vehicle; *Agag* (on indefinite loan from the prince's cousin, Baron Big Boris) proved to be a bit more precise as to what else the Crown Princeling was doing: he was picking his shapely nose.

"By the color of the mud splashed against the carriage window," suggested Eszterhazy, "I should infer that the carriage is now travelling along the Official Northern Remote Route Road."

"And if so, almost a sufficient punishment for his sins!" cried Shtruvvelpeyter. "The local holders of the electoral franchise so seldom chose to pay the very moderate poll-tax that, as a result, the road there hasn't been paved

since . . . since . . . well, since quite a while ago. Or so they tell me. I have never been."

"I have," said Popoff. "I trust that His Young Highness is not obliged to try any of the local hostelries. The fleas there are reported to be large enough to qualify as cavalry remounts."

Von Shtrumpf, however, was not interested in such matters. "If this crack-brained enterprise of August Salvador's is not nipped in the bud," he declared grimly, "our grandchildren may find themselves paying poll-taxes to Austria or Russia or — God help us! who knows what nation or nations which may snap us up as we come apart, like Poland, for lack of a sensible sovereign — Bulgaria, maybe — or Graustark, even — in any of which cases I shall migrate to Egypt, rather than submit. Very well, if 'well' it is, His Nipplehead is on the Official Northern Remote Route Road: what next?" And, before anyone could answer, added that there were worse fates than being bit by fleas, however large.

Eszterhazy rubbed his forehead with his knuckles. "Much as the magnetic telegraph has served to debase human language," he said, "still, it is swifter than any horse, or locomotive engine. The same telegram, in effect, which was sent *me*, should it not be sent to the cross-station at the terminus of the Official Northern Remote Route Road?"

Agreement was that it should; the message was redrafted, and handed over to either the same constable, or another available such; there seeming to be no limit to or shortage of men of that rank in the region of the Red Mountain; who had taken the message of enquiry originally drafted by Dr. Eszterhazy. And so then arose the question, *what* should they do in the meanwhile?

Von Shtrumpf chose to make a speech. "Only the existence of a single sovereign," he said, "keeps the Flemings and the Walloons together in Belgium. The same is true of Scandia and Froreland. Of Austria-Hungary. And of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania. Let the respected sovereign be removed, and what may the result be? Chaos. That's what."

Eszterhazy, a trifle more testily than was usual with him, said, "And my hair is getting thinner on top. What else is new?"

Popoff, who seldom displayed interest in any events of a political nature more current than the Pragmatic Sanction, which had confirmed Maria Teresa as (among other items) "King" of Hungary — the ancient usages of that nation making no provision for a Queen Regnant — pointed out that Switzerland had remained united as a republic despite its severalty of languages and peoples. It was pointed out to him that Switzerland had had more centuries to grow used to such union than S.-P.-T. had had decades; for a moment he grew silent. Then —

"I know what let's do!" he exclaimed. "Ye all know the trouble with boarspears is that the momentum of the charging boar sometimes carries him, the charging boar, that is, right up along the shaft of the spear, so that some-

times he can slash his tushes into the huntsman before he dies. Well, I have had cross-guards set onto my new boar-spears, so as to prevent this. In theory. Why shouldn't we, in the time we're waiting, all go out and see how this works? Eh?"

Shtruvvelpeyter said — let it not be said with haste, but without delay — that, alas, his gout —

And Von Shtrumpf declared that, being a servant of the August House, he had no right to risk his person in anything but service to that House. "Much as I should like to, of course. *Love* to."

So it was at length agreed that they should grill some chops off last week's boar (by now growing rather short on chops), and, in the meanwhile, have some good hot Mokha coffee with some good Yah-mah-ee-ka rum. And this was agreed to.

Before and after the grilling of the chops and the eating thereof, a game of whist was played, one of boston, and then another of whist; presently people began to squirm. Von Shtrumpf returned to his theme, but his heart seemed not in it. "And what keeps the Wallachians and the Moldavians united in Romania?" he asked, rhetorically.

"The subventions paid them by the Czar of Russia," was the short reply of Shtruvvelpeyter. As this was not the answer which Von Shtrumpf had expected to get, he followed the way of all flesh, and ignored it.

"What is delaying the fellow?" he asked. "Can he have stopped to drink somewhere?"

Prince Popoff did not appear worried. "Nothing is delaying him, except the fact that his horse has no wings. And when on such a mission, he would certainly not have stopped to drink somewhere. Fierce and faithful are the constables of this mountain region. He will be here in a minute."

With perhaps more precision than appropriate in a guest, Von Shtrumpf took out his heavy gold watch and clicked it open. "He will? Let us see." For a while nothing was heard except the grumbling of a well-masticated chop off of last week's boar as it travelled through someone's stomach and upper or lower intestine. Then the sound of a set of hooves clattering into the courtyard.

"Here he is now," said Popoff. "How long was that?"

"Bind-Satan-and-send-him-down-to-Hell! — ExACTly one minute!" he looked at his host with much respect.

There entered now, still sweating and steaming from his ride, a typical rural constable, which is to say, a typical mountain-man, with a leathern band affixed round his right arm; on this was a much-effaced sigil, symbol, or shield, and a much-effaced numeral. The man bore in his hand a folded piece of paper, and this he handed over at once to the outstretched hand of Prince Popoff. Who gave it a quick glance, and swore.

"Bind-Satan-and-send-him-down-to-Hell, indeed! O Thou dear Cross! But this is the message we gave ye to send. Where is the answer?"

The man brushed moisture from his bristly cheek and chin, and from his great drooping moustache. "There ben't no answer, My Worship," said he. "The clerk, he jiggles and he clickles his little clicket; and, says he, he says the string be broke."

"He says — *what?*"

"The *what* is broke?"

"That there li'-bit wire string as the message they say it pass along, what they *say*," continued the constable, evidently no great believer in the miracles of magnetic telegraphy. "It has fell."

For an instant this curious image was considered; then, almost simultaneously the four others cried, "The line is down!"

The constable nodded his shag-head. Then he passed the back of his shag-wrist across his lips, a gesture evidently noticed and identified by His Worship. "Down to the kitchen, then," said Prince Yohan, "and tell them to give ye a big drink from the second-best barrel." The man brightened directly, bowed deeply, and was off immediately. Evidently there were barrels below, and perhaps far below, even the second-best. "Well here's a fine how-are-ye," the prince said. "No telegram can get through to the cross-station at the terminus of the Official Remote Northern Route Road."

Outside, a slight and soft Spring rain came mizzling down. Inside, the four men considered this new development. "Outrageous," said Eszterhazy, "that in a country abounding in goodly trees, telegraph wires should continue to be strung in places from shrub to shrub, and from bush to bush! No wonder the line is down . . . again. The wonder is that it is ever up, at all. Well —"

But Von Shtrumpf, still riding the rails of his one-track mind, said, dolefully, "Not alone chaos. Inevitably, civil war. Unless-unless — it may be treason to suggest, but — if not *this* heir to the Heir — then *who?*"

Who, indeed.

A moment's silence. Then: "Queen Victoria has many sons," said Shtruvvelpeyter, as though commenting on the weather.

The subject was seldom spoken of, but here perhaps the major, after all a principal secretary to the Foreign Office, had found the kernel in the nut. Not much may have been known about Salvador Samuel, self-styled "Sovereign of the Scythians and Pannonians," but it was known that he *had* married Magdalena Stewart: call her "Mad Maggie" who would, she nevertheless *had* been a Stewart (or Stuart) and a Royal Stuart (or Stewart) at that: she had also been an ancestress of the British Queen, however many times removed. And more than once, more than one mind in Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania had considered (with more than one emotion) of an almost-endless line of vessels ascending the Ister and bearing as it might be such names as HMS *Take*, *Catch*, *Rake*, *Snatch*, *Seize*, and so on and so on; at least one of them conveying, as it might be, Prince Alfred, Prince Arthur, Prince Leopold, or Prince Who, with his umbrella and his cricket-bat and

his crown. . . .

"Austria and Russia would never allow it," said Von Shtrumpf. "*Would they? — we should all have to drink tea!*" he cried.

But Eszterhazy had something else on his mind than the possibly enforced consumption of Orange Pekoe, Lapsang-Souchong, or Oolong. "I suggest that you two gentlemen of the Court consider what you both may think best; meanwhile our host and I will withdraw so as not to disturb you."

Withdrawn into an ante-room the open doors of which debouched upon the vastly wide steps, "Very tactful," said Prince Yohan. "Very tactful. And now that ye have got us both alone, what is it that ye wish to propose? Eh?"

"Would you very much like to swear allegiance," asked Eszterhazy, "to some, say, King Algernon or King Archibald?"

The prince surveyed the moist landscape. "Not very much, no," said he. "I won't speak of my own ancestral pretensions, every family has those — I suppose that your King Algebra or King Artichoke would be better than some King Vladimir or King Otto — always better King Log than King Stork . . . but . . . what . . . ?"

Eszterhazy shortly gestured to where the light sparse green had begun to grow up along the foothills, ranges, and ridges, of the Red Mountain. "*That* is what I would propose," said he. "Since His Young Highness the Crown Princeling cannot be prevented, via telegraphed orders, from entering Austria along the Northern Remote Route Road, he *must* be prevented by some other means; he must, in short, not be allowed to leave the country while this imbecile lust is upon him."

"And therefore?" Yohan looked at Eszterhazy.

Eszterhazy looked at Yohan.

"Need I remind Your Vigor of the ancient parable about Mohammed and the mountain?" he asked.

They were outside. They were by no means out of sight of any part of the castle, but they might by no means be seen from the front parts of it. "Some say that these mountains are worn-down, and not rugged," said Prince Pop-off.

"Some do," murmured Eszterhazy.

"But parts of them are rugged enough, that it helps to know the mountain passes if you want to move an army through —"

"Indeed —"

"Now, right here — *here* — through these declivities and between these peaks, ye see —"

"I see."

"This is where he would have to come, Old Ginger I mean, ye see."

"I see," murmured Eszterhazy. *Old Ginger*. What a perfect nickname for the Holy Roman Emperor at the time of the Third Crusade: Old Ginger.

That is (or was), Frederick Barbarossa. Of course his real name was no more Barbarossa than it was Old Ginger. Or for that matter, Hobson or Jobson. Still, it was an interesting survival, one which Eszterhazy had not encountered before.

It was an appropriate place for old survivals, here among the men of the mountains; for they were very much old survivors themselves. In fact, recollecting another old legend, that which had them pursuing the chamois, barefoot, from crag to crag, he considered that these men might themselves be compared to chamois, living where others would not live; and then, by adaptation, living where others *could* not live. Those snobby, Frenchified bourgeois nobility of Bella and Avar-Ister, who so looked down upon the men of the mountains — if the men of the mountains, ignorant of cities though they were, if they had to live there, they would survive . . . they would manage . . . if he had to, Prince Popoff could carry carcasses in the Ox Market . . . but let the reverse be true, if Baron This of Bella, or Count That of Avar-Ister, had to live on the Red Mountain, they could not live there at all. Surely they would die.

"Well, enough chatter. To work, to work. . . I don't suppose that we need go galloping along a cliff-face, **arrantaparranta**, as Homer said about the mules. Here, right here"; the figure of a woman appeared at one of the rear gates, and came towards them almost running; "this here outcrop of rocks right here, they are certainly a genuine part of the mountains —" The woman began waving her apron at them. Eszterhazy peered at her, wondering. "Surely that is your old wet-nurse," he said. "Madámka. I wonder what she wants."

"Wants to poke her hairy nose into what is none of her business, I am sure. Never mind *her*. Here. Get your back up against this big clump of rock just as ye see me doing. Reach behind and grab aholt of it, just dig in your fingers, so —"

Eszterhazy followed the directions. But before the next set might be given, the once-wet-nurse arrived, the very figure of fury.

"No!" exclaimed the old woman, screwing up her features, so that they looked even more unattractive than usual. "No! **No!** This is not right! His Reverence may have done it; then again he may not have. *He* would have good reason — *you* have *not!* This is not *right*, this is not *right!*" and she clenched her jaws and face-muscles, and she rolled her eyes, performing in a few seconds a "scene" which might have taken others minutes, quarter-hours, or longer.

His Vigor, the Prince Yohan Popoff, said, with controlled forcefulness, "Wet-woman! Old nurse! Do not interfere! Be quiet —"

"No!" she screamed. "No! I won't be quiet! It is not right! The manners of our mountains do not *like* it! The —"

"Smudgy old woman," cried her long-ago nurseling. "Ye know little enough of what is meant by 'the manners of our mountains'! Be gone, I say!

Be gone! Or I shall send your sons away to the cities! No law obliges me to retain them here on retainer because long ago I nursed their mammy's pap! Leave off, I say! Be gone!"

She was gone.

She being gone, a gesture from the prince, and again they huddled close to the mass of rock. "Remember," urged Popoff, "what the *Romi*, Lucretius, said about the atoms. You must conceive of these with the most strong conception of which you are capable. Conceive of yourself as amongst the atoms of these rocks. Then conceive of yourself as *moving* them, these atoms of the rocks, mounds, and mountains. If you but have faith that you can, you can push and press and shove atoms *A* and *B* — atoms *A* and *B* can then move atoms *C* and *D* and *E* and *F* — and, if you do not yield, atoms *C* and *D* and *E* and *F* can move atoms *G* and *H* and *I* and *J* and *K* —

"Move! Move! *Move! Move!*"

Eszterhazy had thought and conception and belief and faith. He pushed. He *did* push. He shoved. He *did* shove. He moved. He *did* move. And the rocks, did *they* move? The rocks moved, too.

Did the boulders move? The boulders trembled, shuddered; seemed to *move*. Did the **mountains** move?

The mountains moved.

(In the chapel of the Armenian Merchants' Guild in Bella long ago a traveller safely returned from Africa had hung up near the high altar an ostrich-egg in a container of golden filigree on a golden chain, as a thanks offering. Now, suddenly, it began slowly to swing like a pendulum. The phenomenon was duly recorded in the records of the congregation; Eszterhazy, learning of this phenomenon, was moved to make certain researches, and to convey the results to certain of his correspondents; why indeed do we not speak of an eszterhaziograph instead of a seismograph? who indeed can say?)

The Grumpkin Gorge, long unrecognized as a gorge, the roadbed of the Official Northern Remote Route Road, from (and to) Austria, was now blocked. Not entirely blocked, to be sure. Individuals, individual men, as individuals, might and could have moved therethrough, carefully picking their way. But no mass or group of men might now move through swiftly. And, certainly, through these mounds of lichen-crustured rocks, schist, granite, what-have-you, no carriages and no baggage-wagons might move at all.

Which left, in that part of the country — unless one wished to carry no baggage other than an alpenstock — only the Official Southern Remote Route Road from Austria.

From (and to) Austria.

Eszterhazy, as he pushed and strained and heaved, and "conceived," had an impression that they appeared like a pair of piano-movers: he knew, though, that it was no mere piano that they were moving. It did not surprise him that there was an intermittent fall of smaller stones and rocks rolling

and raining down upon them; but he paid not much attention to it until he heard his co-mover, Popoff, cry out in pain.

"Keep on, keep on, do not stop," said the prince, grimacing.

Dr. E. did not stop; but, looking down, and perceiving some large shadow, he did look up. Immediately his impression was that of an enormous bird flying overhead. Almost instantly he realized that it was no bird. Whatever it was, was almost at once out of sight — he could hardly stop what he was doing to run forward and look up to see better. But in a moment the shape came again into sight and view. The old woman did not look down at him. She did not say anything. He had never seen her before — he had *not*? — yes, of course, he had — but never at such an angle. Far high and above, she was, and she was riding on something. She was riding side-saddle, as what woman would not? — for if not, her skirts would bunch up, and Heaven forbid one might observe in daylight with one's eyes that which, properly, one ought to observe only at night-time, with one's hands and fingers. Yes, side-saddle she rode, angry was her face; who was she and on what was she riding?

A few more passing flights she made, she did not swoop, merely she flew riding by, she sat upon a branch of a tree, God have mercy on us, and a bunch or bundle of shrubbery, sticks, twigs, was fastened at the end of it. As he now watched, straining upward as well as straining backward, he saw a rock come falling down. And it did not fall from higher up on the outcrop of rock against which the two men were still straining.

There came to Eszterhazy anyway some of the words of an old text he had seen once — a part of a reply of the then-monarch of part of what subsequently became the Empire, in response to an alleged fall of what would now be called meteorites — it had begun *We, Isidore Salvador, Vigorously Christian King of all the Scythias*, and had gone on to say that *Reports of stones falling from the skies must suppose that there are stones in the skies, and, as it is well-enough known that there are no stones in the skies, We must reject such reports out of hand . . .*

They were no meteorites which had now fallen; therefor —

"We must stop now," said Popoff. "Here. Help me back. Oh."

Popoff lay reclining with one leg bandaged. Von Shtrumpf and Shtruvvelpeyter were playing another of their endless, two-handed games of cards. Everyone was, in theory, waiting: but everyone had almost forgotten what it was which they were waiting for . . . Enter another rough-looking fellow with a leather arm-band.

"Ah, it's a constable. What's up, Constable? Found another stray cow?"

"— please Your Princeliness, there are Mongols on the Meadow Road, where the stop-station be. They say they have leave to pass, and us mayn't stop they. So the guards they'm asked we to leave you know, and to instruct them in this matter."

The card-players looked up from their greasy decks. "*Mongols* in the meadow?" asked Von Shtrumpf.

"What can he *mean*?" enquired Shtruvvelpeyter.

Popoff moved to rise, sank back with a groan. "No use," said he. "*I* can't go. So you three had better go."

They went.

The young man there at the border-station *did* look somewhat like Little Handsome Hansli the puppet, and he was shouting. "What do you *mean*, you can't let me cross without orders? How dare you stop me? I have Diplomatic Immunity!" His voice was slightly hoarse, as though he had been shouting for a while; but he might as well have told them that he had Pott's Fracture, for all the good it was doing him. "'Orders,' what orders?" he cried, literally stamping his foot. "For that matter, *whose* orders?"

Eszterhazy stepped forward; and, as all eyes turned on him, he said, "These orders, sir," and he handed over the document which had been handed him by his host, Prince Yohan — who had copied it, with a sufficiency of moans and groans, as he lay upon his couch of pain — copied it from some older form and model. The young man took it, not without a look of injury and outrage, and glanced at it.

The document began:

WE, JOHANNES, to our well-beloved Cousins and fellow-Christians of high degree, videlicet the Kings of the Greeks, Franks, Burgundians, and Castillians, as well as to all Hetmans, Waywodes, Chieftains, Dukes, Counts, and Constables . . .

— and went on to describe by title, clothing, and bodily appearance (as revealed by Psalmanazzar and Agag) His Young Highness, heir to The Heir, etc., etc., and adjured ALL THE AFOREMENTIONED to

pay him all worshipful respect — but allow him not to pass without further word and release, and herein fail not, by the Holy Sepulchre and the Anointing Oil, lest they die unshriven and impaled and become meat for pigs and crows . . .

There was a signature, and a very large seal.

His Young Highness, August Salvador, the heir to the Heir, did not bother to carry further the unpersuasive role of Mr. Bill-Silas Sneed, Drummer in American Cloth and Cheese. He read the document, and his laugh, as he tossed it down, seemed genuine. His face, which had been petulant

and fatigued, once again justified its likeness, appearing (suitably framed) upon the tables of about half-a-million servant-girls and shop-keepers' assistants. The document fell, and one of the wild-looking men picked it up. There were a number of wild-looking men at the scene, many with leather arm-bands and leather badges. They may not ever have done much writing themselves, but they had evidently a respect for that which was written . . . had they lived where more was written, and more often, perhaps they might have had less.

The Crown Princeling said, "You must have ransacked my old Bobbo's trunk to locate this antique mummery, or flummery. Even if those kings were present, do you think that any of them would pay attention?"

"No," said Eszterhazy, "but there are constables present, and *they* will."

So there were. So they did. This ancient office, for long a sort of quiet smile, these ancient officers of the counts' stables, duties now largely confined to the impoundment of cattle, lost, strayed, or stolen; of this ancient office, still they were officers. Hulking, hairy, uncouth, wild-looking, unkempt, a simple badge of office strapped to a sleeve, they passed this odd, odd document from hand to hand; and those who could read, read it to those who could not. And always they pointed to the seal. And always they pointed to the signature.

And steadily they continued coming in from the woods. And gradually they blocked the road. And gradually the Crown Princeling wilted. His bravado, his self-assurance, melted away. Mere youth and courage and passion had carried him thus far. If he had simply gone out on this mad-cap scheme in disguise, he might have succeeded. Even if he had added to this mad-cap scheme the hare-brained addition of a false diplomatic immunity, he might have succeeded.

Then again, he might not.

At other border-points, crossings, stop-stations, no one might have ever heard of the Grand Mogul; seeing a diplomatic seal, they might have simply let the baggage and its owner pass on into foreign territory. But here —

Right here — only here — and here alone, they had heard of him quite well. That is, not precisely of *him* — the last him, dying (long after the Sepoy Mutiny) in squalor and exile — but of his ancestors. Babar? Akbar? Well, anyway — Tamurlane. And Genghis Khan.

And *Genghis Khan*.

Something about that last name caught in Eszterhazy's mind. It, but not quite exactly it. Had it not other forms? Certainly. *Zinghis Khan*, he had surely seen that one somewhere. But that was not *it*. In a flash and a surge it came to him. *Chinghis Khan*. Well. And what of it?

Old Gingers. That of it. He had been wrong about its having been a nickname for Barbarossa. *This is where he would have come, Old Ginger, I mean . . . it helps to know the mountain passes if you want to move an army through . . .* Well . . . It may have passed out of all common knowledge that,



here in Eastern Europe, they had once waited for the Golden Horde to come riding. But it had not passed out of common knowledge here. And here was where August Salvador had come with his preposterous "diplomatic immunity" (probably his valet had bought it from the valet of the tottery Jam Jam Sahib).

The rough, archaic-looking, archaic-thinking rural constables looked grimly at the poor, befuddled, school-and-lessons-shunning Princeling.

"The Mongols shall not pass," they said.

Long after Eszterhazy had uttered the tired, worn-past-satire words — indicating Von Shtrumpf and Shtruvvelpeyter — had said, "Will you go with these gentlemen, please?" for what else could he have said? — still, he looked at the document, smeared as it was by the honest dirt on the rough and calloused hands of the rural constables, the last of whom to read it had passed it on to him. He looked at the seal. It had meant something to these wild men. But it meant nothing to him. And the signature? Again — it had meant much to the men of these half-lost, secluded mountains, where the past lived on and the present was not yet born; did it mean anything to *him*, Engelbert Eszterhazy, Doctor of this and Doctor of that?

His own finger traced the large, archaic letters. *Yohan Popoff*. Well, and so —

Not quite. He had read — what he had expected to read, not actually what

was written. Which was:

Yohan Popa

Yohan Popa, was what the signature actually read. In other words, words which both mystified and made clear, *John the Priest*, in other words. Now he knew who had conducted the clandestine communion service in the chapel; the exotic, divine liturgy, or mass.

"We are waiting for you, Engelbert," someone called from the carriage.

"Been there a long time," that family? Yes, they had. They had indeed been there a long time. A very long time indeed. A "descendant of His Reverence"? To be sure. Celebrated the divine liturgy clandestinely, offered guests the liberty of his kingdom, did he? Of course. To be sure. He was entitled. And *still* he and his men stood guard against the Mongols. John the Priest. Yes.

Or, put in a very slightly different way, Prester John.

Been there a long time, had they?

Yes, a very long time.

Indeed.

"I am coming now," called Eszterhazy.



PROMETHEUS IN WAX

Icarus did not die by attrition,
One feather flown and then another,
Until his brown arms flailed against the sky
And failed above the sea.
He fell in fire,
Each hand holding a hateful sun
That burned away all chance to clasp the air,
And, at the blackened last,
Coiled up from the wine dark waves
In darker smoke.

— Ace G. Pilkington

The Observatory

by George H. Scithers

No death rays . . .

Back in January of this year, we spent three days in Seattle with six other science-fiction writers and about a dozen scientists and program managers from various Department of Defense, U. S. Army, and Battelle Institute laboratories. Our subject: future developments in small arms — which means pistols, rifles, and small machine guns; things that one or two men can carry through the woods and over the hills. But no death rays.

We thought up new ideas and remembered ideas we had seen or heard in the past; we discussed those ideas, set aside those with no apparent value, and thought some more about what might be useful in the next few decades.

Throughout, we applied Linus Pauling's Rule: "The best way to have good ideas is to have lots of ideas." As for the government scientists, they thought up some ideas too; mostly, they listened. Some of our ideas, they explained, had already been tried — and didn't work. Others — well, they really didn't want to say much about things they were actively working on. And some ideas were new to them; *these* were the object of the whole conference.

No death rays? Lasers — the closest thing available just now — are frightfully inefficient, all too easy to defend against, and awfully cumbersome to carry up steep cliffs. It's lots easier to cut a hole in someone with a fast-moving chunk of heavy metal than to burn one with a laser. As for *real* death rays — no. The physical processes that might make one work are not yet known, and our mission did not include recommending basic research.

All in all, very interesting, and quite inexpensive for the sponsoring organizations. Much cheaper, in fact, than

putting any of our ideas into hardware — and even that is far cheaper than overlooking an idea that an unfriendly someone might bring to a battlefield.

Awful ideas . . .

A few issues back, we were grumpy about ideas which *looked* good, which were disasters in practice, but which are still being applied. But ideas which look *awful* from the start can also develop the same horrid momentum.

- Welfare systems that are easier for the needy to get into than out of; such systems have been around for over two *thousand* years, have been utter disasters every time.

- Shortly before the first oil crisis, there were about a thousand route-miles of electrified railway in this country in common-carrier freight service, and most of that using hydro-electric power. Our response to the oil shortages? Now, there are about *twenty* miles of such electric freight in service.

- Although the U. S. Constitution assigns law-making to the Congress, and the faithful execution of those laws to the President, nowadays candidates for the Presidency campaign by discussing which laws ought to be enacted and which repealed, while Congressmen, Congresswomen, and Senators of both genders spend all *their* time seeing that the laws are faithfully executed, of course for the benefit of their constituents. No wonder the judiciary seems to be taking over the government!

"Ideas alone . . .

. . . are not enough!" — so goes one of our most frequent comments on rejected manuscripts. (Another: "Your idea is old, weak, and tired.") An idea is not a story,

no more than one is a completed piece of hardware; an idea is just the starting point: a problem or a background for a science-fiction or fantasy story, which — almost always — is about *people* coping with problems, making changes, and themselves changing as a result. "A story must accomplish something and arrive somewhere," as Mark Twain said, even if the resolution be a tragic one.

An idea, then: a science-based, religious dictatorship in the near future. One way to avoid being published would be to simply present the idea — and stop. Presenting it as a history lecture is worse; having two characters in your story do the lecturing isn't any better. Stories should be mostly narration, not exposition and synopsis!

What Fritz Leiber did was to tell a story, not of the dictatorship's rise, but of its fall, and of the men and women who used science-disguised-as-witchcraft to fight science-disguised-as-religion. Read *Gather, Darkness!* and see how a master story-teller handled the idea — and did it 43 years ago. Then read Robert A. Heinlein's *Sixth Column* [published before Leiber's tale] to see how Leiber made Heinlein's basic idea wholly his own. But — unless you can do something different — and better — with this idea than did these two masters of science fiction, you must try a fresher idea.

You might look at a trend just now becoming apparent: the establishment of the judiciary as a religion in this country. Consider the parallels: robes of office, dependence on Revealed Wisdom, even the power to punish heresy in the guise of contempt of court . . . Now, take that trend to its logical climax — and go beyond: how will *that* dictatorship be overthrown? Of course, it will be — as Generalissimo Franco once remarked, on hearing of the fall of one more strong man, "Dictators never learn." But Franco himself . . . now think about *that*!

. . . and a legacy:

Just four years ago, on the 3rd of March, 1982, we became editor of this venerable magazine. We approached our job with three goals:

First, to make *Amazing® Stories* the *best* as well as the first and oldest science-fiction magazine. We think we have done this; we hope you feel the same.

Second, not to be the *last* editor of *Amazing®*. Our successor is Patrick Lucien Price, long the managing editor of *Amazing®*, an assistant editor of *Dragon®* magazine, and now the editor of this magazine. He is splendidly qualified; we leave *Amazing®* in good hands.

Our third goal, alas, we did not reach; it is clear that the editor must be *at* Lake Geneva, WI, working closely with the rest of our parent company, TSR, Inc., to make *Amazing®* first in circulation as well as in age and excellence among SF magazines. The transition, therefore, is entirely a friendly one; Pat becomes *editor* of this magazine at the end of February, 1986.

Our sincere thanks to our assistant editors here in Philadelphia: Darrell Schweitzer, Dainis Bisenieks, John Sevcik, John Betancourt, and Henry Lazarus, who are with us now; John M. Ford, John Ashmead, Meg Phillips, Mark Rostien, and Sanford Meschkow, who helped in the past; our three Temple University interns: Margaret Phillips, Lori Kulikowski, and Vicki Hoenigke; and our local photographer, Al Di Bona of Advanced Litho, Inc. We are especially grateful to Elinor Mavor and Arthur Bernhard, our immediate predecessors, who kept the flame alight.

Finally, the management and staff of TSR, Inc., have given us outstanding support throughout our four happy years as editor; many *many* thanks! ∞

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Johnnie Phillips

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